

**TEXTUALITY, FORMS OF 'READING', AND THE
ENCOUNTER OF ART**

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Declaration of Authorship I Rebecca Harris hereby declare that this thesis and the work presented in it is entirely my own. Where I have consulted the work of others, this is always clearly stated.

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Abstract

This MPhil sets out to explore the materiality and non-materiality of art and how this relates to our interpretation in relation to subject and object. It focuses on the visual and the non-visible elements of artworks, considering the conditions and the pre-conditions of the gaze, and its relevance in the moment of perception. Approaching authors in art theory and beyond, writing is discussed as theoretical, fictional and biographical when engaging with the art practices of Gerhard Richter and Hanne Darboven.

If the visual does not exist independently, beyond or outside of language, then the visible and the image that art can render, comes as a consequence of being in language. The activity of writing can be used as an instrument to re-approach and re-contextualise the activity of looking at art. It can open dialogues on the spaces between collective and personal thinking and how one relates to this in a creative practice. To engage with our own experiences and cross between the threshold of specific and universal interpretation.

The conceptual and making process might be informed by cultural and historical narratives, intellectual and emotional experiences. Our interpretation is embedded in these sources of understanding. This thesis looks at the practices of non-Jewish German artists, born during WW II, informed by my specific experience of art and reading, with reference to what can be described as a 'Jewish methodology' of thinking. I act within the parameters of art theory, subverting this engagement through different literary and non-literary forms. I take a situated approach to consider the artists' practices, drawing out the implications of my practical experience to think about the organisation and application of materials, to highlight the artist's activity of thinking through the making process.

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Introduction

The title of this thesis begins with the notion of ‘textuality’, which in the context of this body of research is embedded in the term ‘reading.’ These terms identify the particular manner in which I approach interpreting art practice in the context of this research project that I engage with other writers, the approach theory and moments of self-reflection that forms part of this *textualist* approach. Reading is a key activity, for I am constantly reading either the words I write, or the words of another that I am reading to assist interpretation. I use the term ‘encounter’. This thesis considers the activity of interpretation, but also ways in which we might create a different experience of the artwork by thinking of the practice in different terms. By thinking in terms of writing and creative activity outside of art, I wanted to consider the moments of being unexpectedly faced with an experience, and to challenge when experiences on engaging with art are informed by events outside of the immediate experience of art.

The term ‘textuality’ is used as a way of engaging the viewer in different aspects associated with our use language to describe, to interpret, and to relate to experience. It does not set out to privilege writing, but rather the activity that surrounds the experience of writing and reading writing by others, and how this impacts on our engagement with art practice. This theme is often manifested through my personal writing experience, a consciousness of what I have read, and my background, but also a consciousness of the expectations and habits one might bring to the experience of art. Therefore, the term *textuality* relates to the *written word* found in the experience. Key to this is a negotiation of the interpretative language found in art history books and exhibition catalogues, and the introduction of alternative forms of writing considered as part of my own writing experience to approach artworks. Before beginning this project, I approached an artwork by relating to the descriptive language found in essays that return the reader back to a framework for identifying aspects within the art object. In this framework, set out by art historical discourse, there

remains a space between this form of writing and the activity of making carried out by the artist. When I attempt to add further contextualisation to the experience of the artwork, this reinforces ideas already in place. So I think more about the experience of engaging with artists through the making process, while reading art history and theory literature. I will point to an alternative way of thinking about our relationship with art, through different experiences of reading and the context of my own subjective experience of art practice.

By thinking about the use of language that traditionally sits outside the experience of art, my intention is to open the potential for different experiences and engagements with art practice. When I use the term ‘language’, I mean how we use language when we write, how we negotiate the way we understand writing by others when we read, and how we articulate this through speech or refer to the activity of listening when we write. To explore this further, I have begun to consider the activity of translation and touched on areas of philology through the writing of George Steiner in particular; how the past, present and future are comprised simultaneously and the temporal structure of language keeps them “artificially distinct.”¹ [The experience of art has the potential to merge the past and present by bringing one’s memories together with the present encounter. While our engagement with art practice can activate ideas that impact on future experiences of different artworks.](#)

[Steiner](#) writes:

It is only by breaking through the walls of language that visionary observance can enter the world of total and immediate understanding. Where such understanding is attained, the truth needs no longer suffer the impurities and fragmentation that speech necessarily entails.²

¹ George Steiner, “Retreat from the Word”, in *George Steiner: A Reader*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), 283.

² Ibid.

In fact, while we are always engaged in language, this is an idea that we might consider when writing in reaction to the experience of art. I would take the idea of breaking through the walls of language as a positive method for renegotiating habits of writing about art, rather than accepting that there is a “purer” experience beyond the engagement that can be gained by encountering art, for example identifying in religious iconography.

This thesis focuses on the tenants of the visual in art, and relating these to ideas in literature and literary theory. Writing on Gerhard Richter, I will present theories that relate to this, while in the chapter on Hanne Darboven, I will portray aspects of my thinking in relation to literary themes as I see them, bringing in aspects of other creative practices to consider where the literary model can be used to engage with art through different forms of writing outside of art history and theory. I will touch on theories of speech, specifically the idea of the ‘dialectical’, for it presents two or more positions that, when presented in the visual world, add to the potential for multiple perspectives when thinking about art. This might be the double-rhythm of the universal and specific, of collective and personal thinking, or the physical and conceptual, the seen rather than what we imagine is absent. This creates an opportunity to identify the complexity of separating biography and art form, but also to consider and question assumptions of passive reading and active reading around the artwork.

The *gesture* of making is often used to identify elements that relate back to certain biographical and historical information. Here I am presenting two forms of thinking, the first being around the artist’s activity and the second being the activity of writing about art. By thinking in terms of how language functions in writing and through the experience of reading, I will attempt to identify when the thinking-self relates to experiences from elsewhere. By pulling apart the activity of writing, one is able to consider how much of the experience of art takes place during the engagement with

art, while also recognising a way of thinking about the work of art that might offer an alternative to the traditional experience.

When I write the term 'imagination' I am referring to the intellectual experience of art in the moments when we consciously attempt to construct a dialectic between what is perceived and what we already know. This is the point at which the universal relates to the specific - and therefore the emotional and ethical - and one engages with art to form a personal experience of the artist's practice. Every object, every colour, every material is contextualised, and when something appears to have avoided being contextualised, we can assume that it has not been recognised within the space or context that we have found it. An artwork is a key example of an object that one attempts to contextualise regardless of the aspects of its making and material. Our experience of art is affected by the visual elements that make up the work, sometimes before the activity of contextualising takes place within the context of the exhibition space. As part of this, we respond to the specifying discursive framework that has been set up to contextualise the work and therefore think through the experience of art. One question might be whether there can be any aspect of the encounter with art that could be described as a non-discursive aspect of aesthetic experience. Rather than offering another form of contextualisation, the notion of textuality provides a way of thinking about art through a method of reading and writing, towards a different engagement with art, providing a space to challenge what we might consider to be discursive or non-discursive when experiencing art. By thinking about the work through the *textualist reading*, one resists closing down the many ways that we can engage with the artwork, considering the potential of its parts within and beyond the context of its presentation. I will identify and consider those parts of the artist's practice that can be linked to reading, writing and the writing activity, through methods of thinking through writing. By doing so I will show how we are able to activate our intellectual and emotional parts in the experience of art.

Subjectivity exists at the level of writing and sustains and perpetuates established narratives that surround the artist and their work. The activity of writing can be used as an instrument to re-approach and re-contextualise the activity of looking at art. It can be used to destabilise familiar methods of engagement with interpretation, for example, if one thinks more about the reading activity that takes place while writing and so being more conscious of the engagement with language being used to consider different experiences of art. Thinking in terms of one's subjectivity can also provide an opportunity to challenge moments of private thought and personal responses to the engagement with art. So for example, when there appears to be *nothing* to see, we might think instead of the experience in terms of the *absences*, and what it is that makes the experience affect our senses, despite these absences. As another way of thinking about subjectivity, we can consider the artist's making in terms of a thinking process, of adding and editing, of thinking in terms of one material or colour against another for instance; it is possible to shift aspects of one's own experience of art.

Initially, when considering of my personal writing experience and this project, the approach that I have taken to researching and writing the chapters that follow responds to the experience of art history essay writing, and then writing for press, for collections, exhibition catalogues and display panels. This has often led me to emulate a style that responds satisfactorily to the reader's expectation of what such writing should involve. Therefore, much of my writing life is based on the art history tradition found in the commercial and public art sectors.

The writing of Hélène Cixous and Jacques Derrida has had an impact on my writing technique. Cixous's activity of writing in particular, and her identification of the self in relation to the world around her, has influenced my approach to writing about art and thinking about the writing of others during this process. The idea of *reading-writing* is very much marked by my experience of Cixous, while thinking in terms of

the living experience of writing – that being one’s own subjectivity – comes back to this engagement with art. The linguistic body is in the moment of encounter, for it is the going to and moving away from the artwork, the experience of one’s own body in the space of art, and the recognition of another’s when thinking in terms of engagement.

‘Art Writing’, which is often characterised as an art practice that considers the writing process as action and making, has had an impact on the methodology for this research project. In art writing, words used in writing and speech become part of a creative activity. It often relates to speech, performativity and how one might *pronounce*, but also how one acts out the *gesture* as a writer, as identified above. As a practice, the writer is concerned with the fixing and unfixing of words: the possibility of *aporia*.³ It relates to the shifting moments of perception, between distance and closeness, our proximity to the subject of our task. Therefore, writing itself becomes the object. This has affected my engagement with the writing process, manifested through a process of self-reflective writing. However, my research has attempted to consider what it means to write about artworks, while using certain aspects of art writing to inform this engagement. Here I will engage with ideas that surround what might be termed ‘figurative’ artworks, to then consider these artworks by negotiating literary elements that can be identified in order to engage with them. Here I act within the parameters of art theory rather than artistic practice, referencing ways to engage with art that are taken from art historical methods of research and writing, while also attempting to develop ways to subvert this engagement by using other literary forms and my experience of artistic practice, including art writing. Focusing on Gerhard Richter and Hanne Darboven, I will engage more closely with artworks that appear to resist familiar methods of interpretative engagement. The aim will be to analyse and

³ Adrian Rifkin, “From an Obstructed Viewpoint, Art-Writing-Image” (First of four lectures presented as part of series, Iniva, October 8, 2012).

evaluate, to negotiate how art is experienced, and to then present ideas that could provide the potential for a different experience. A key aspect is thinking about the possibility of writing and imagining the visual, the identification of an artwork through notions of reading and interpretation through the medium of writing, and negotiation of forms of writing in relation to artistic practice. My intention is to offer a method whereby language in writing moves beyond the context we find it in, so as to activate alternative writing forms. With these alternative writing forms we are able to recognise another approach to art, and therefore challenge our expectation of creativity and the visual. This provides an opportunity to think about the activity of the artist's practice, and the way in which the writer and viewer engage with the final artwork. I hope to draw out the activity of making through my writing to provide the reader with the potential to engage with the moments that are not necessarily spoken or written about.

Richter and Darboven are two major artists that have been presented in group and monographic exhibitions, in catalogues, and theoretical and art history books. Richter continues to develop his practice, with a recent retrospective at Tate Modern (2011-2012) that cemented his reputation among a broader art-viewing public worldwide. Darboven continued to develop her practice up until her death in 2009, and while her work attracted international acclaim, the nature of her practice resisted an affirmed position in people's consciousness. Darboven's practice maintains a strong conceptual, written element that appears to prevent easy engagement. This seems contrary to Richter's more 'figurative' practice, and yet his *Grey* paintings, for example, unsettle the expectation of the gaze when one attempts critical engagement.

Richter's *Grey* paintings (dates variable) and Darboven's *24 Gesänge Opus 14,15 a, b 1984* maintain an element of resistance to interpretation – both visually and conceptually – despite the highly visual content and the object-hood found when encountering the artworks in the exhibition context. In order to approach this

‘resistance’, attention will be given to the critical writing that circulates around these works. In the Richter chapter I will focus on the writing of art historian Georges Didi-Huberman, when he discusses at length the non-art, rescued prints from Auschwitz. Through close analysis of this critical engagement with ideas on looking and interpretation, I will show how one is able to think about what it means to engage with images through a writing practice on an ethical and intellectual level. Considering a number of works by Richter, I will present a method for thinking about the term ‘textuality,’ with reference to an interpretation of ‘reading’, in order to theorise artworks. This presents an opportunity to re-evaluate and engage with Richter’s practice as a painter, opening up alternative routes to thinking of the visual around us, as well as the visual world of art. The Darboven chapter will focus on writers working on critical art theory, but also those outside of the context of art history and theory. Broadening my own conventions of reading to engage with creative practices outside of art, I will then re-engage with Darboven’s work. Darboven’s *24 Gesänge Opus 14,15 a, b 1984*, in particular, offers an opportunity to present my position in response to art. I will identify ways in which artworks by both artists can resist and invite engagement, while establishing and activating the viewer’s position in the encounter.

Gerhard Richter was born in Dresden in 1932. Presented with the opportunity to move to West Germany in 1961, Richter enrolled at the Academy of Art in Düsseldorf, where he met fellow students Sigmar Polke, Blinky Palermo and Konrad Lueg (better known now as art dealer Konrad Fischer). Richter regarded himself as a painter, concentrating on the processes of applying paint to the surface, and rejecting any sense of consistency in style, so as to freely investigate the principles of painting. Well known for his use of ‘ready-made’ sources that, on first appearance at least, provide his painting with a visual objectivity, the artist’s well-known technique of blurring the paint removes the clarification a viewer might look for, therefore almost refusing the

traditional identification of the image. On close investigation the image, in fact, becomes abstraction, the lack of visibility giving the sense of memory always drifting from our gaze. The artist has said of this blur “I blur to make everything equal, everything equally important and equally unimportant.”⁴ Over the course of the last 20 years the artist has been developing his *abstract paintings*, thus moving away from the figuration to produce works that forgo obvious identification of an image. Since 1962, a consistent, and yet intermittent, element of his practice has been the creation of *Grey* canvases. These works, that vary greatly in tone and application of paint, offer an insight into the broader range of motifs that run through the artist’s practice that I will set out to present through an engagement with a selection of the artist’s work.

Darboven (1941-2009), is considered to be a conceptual artist, while she herself considered her practice firstly as writing, and secondly as fine art, regardless of the obvious materiality present in most of her works presented in exhibitions. Her biography is not a straightforward art historical narrative, for the artist remained in relative isolation. For the most part, it is believed that it was on her first, year-long visit to New York in 1964 that she developed parts of her practice that would inform how her work continued back in Germany.

Having met artists such as Sol LeWitt, Carl Andre, Mel Bochner and Joseph Kosuth, Darboven developed her abstract, geometrical drawings on graph paper, using numbers and calculations to create drawing and writing systems. On her return to Hamburg, she developed a formula for date calculation that would eventually help her structure time-based works. Early mathematical calendars were arranged as wall installations, acting as an attempt to quantify time in space. She did travel New York again in 1966, with the intention of moving there permanently, but returned to

⁴ Tom McCarthy, “Blurred Visionary: Gerhard Richter’s Photo-Paintings,” *Guardian*, September 22, 2011, <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2011/sep/22/gerhard-richter-tate-retrospective-panorama>. [Accessed 20th December 2016]

Germany much earlier than anticipated due to her father's death in 1968, continuing to exhibit internally.

Her practice as an attempt to work against forgetting, reconstructing time through writing, with the inclusion of events and people of social and historical relevance as a method for creating her own historical narratives. The writing functions as a disciplined operation, forming a structure containing repetition and variations of numbers, texts and signs that appear subordinate to information, which remains outside of the visual experience. And while one is able to identify a process that relates to the activity of the writer, the chapter presented here will focus too on the visual and object elements that make up the artist's work. One can relate these elements to modes of thinking in art, thinking in terms of our own contemporary spatial and temporal orientation, and the meaning of this in terms of the image and the artwork.

By bringing the writing of George Didi-Huberman together with work by Gerhard Richter, I will consider the way in which we respond to images of the past and how we negotiate our proximity to historical events through this engagement. Thinking about this in terms of the language we use to describe the image, I will explore the evaluation of our visual experiences through language, and show how this affects our experience of art. By thinking about this in terms of Richter's practice, we are able to consider how the artist might work conceptually with the images he paints, and therefore, as the viewer, how we can find methods through which to engage with the artist's conceptual and creative process of making. So for example, thinking in terms of how an archive image might resist interpretation, we are able to recognise the gaps or absences as the potential for re-engagement with the past. The blur in Richter's paintings can be recognised as a strategy for dealing with the unreliability of memory and our personal engagement with our memory, or public memorial.

The notion of leaving spaces can be found in literature and music, as I will identify in the chapter on Darboven. I have selected *24 Gesänge Opus 14,15 a, b 1984*, as it is an

example of Darboven's work that appears dry and impenetrable. Conversely strategies to engage with the piece visually when in a book or online, when experiencing it in the context of the gallery setting, the work is all-consuming and involving, not only because of the scale and sound elements that make up the piece, but also because one becomes conscious of the artist's hand; this gives the work a sense of presence. A sense of sobriety informs the engagement that initially seems to warrant an intellectual pursuit of clarity, in order to decipher 'meaning.' And yet, this very presence allows one to approach the work through instinct, therefore provoking a far more visceral response. This chapter focuses on the notion of processes of activity, of ways of writing without describing, in order to allow the viewer to engage their emotional and intellectual response to creative activity.

I have presented elements of both artists' biography and a general overview of their respective practices. This project is continually framed by negotiating such details against a method for thinking more in terms of the material and making aspects of the artworks, and responding to this in relation to one's own experiences. Thus thinking about the artists' practices within and then beyond traditional concepts of art. Through this activity I will show how relevant and current themes within Richter and Darboven's practice help to inform the way we engage with contemporary art practice. Both artists can inform the way we encounter art practice as a creative and intellectual engagement with the visual and non-visual world that we inhabit.

Area of research

I have selected artworks by established artists in order to present alternative approaches to familiar terms in art history and theory, including 'materiality', 'figuration', 'conceptual' and the 'visual.' Memory as a theme, and what we mean by the 'trace' of memory through visual, aural, and linguistic experiences, continues to appear as a recurring theme in this body of research. The interpretation of the object

and subject through an investigation of imagining the tenants of the visual and non-visual has had a significant impact on my own experience of writing about artwork. It has allowed me to test my own assumptions when using certain terms and to question my own experience of writing about artworks when for instance they are not immediately available to look at directly.

The chapters that follow are the culmination of research that began from traditional methods of interpretation as found in art history books. This evolved through an engagement with contemporary art practice and different forms of reading and the experience of difference creative practices. I wanted to think about how one interprets art, not only through the traditional means of art history books, but also through different reading material, such as philosophy, fiction, and writing on poetry, music and theatre. This led to thinking about the activity of writing as a gesture in line with the gesture of thinking-through-making, as an artist does. While the Richter chapter remains focused on the writing of Didi-Huberman in particular, the influence of H  l  ne Cixous is evident and recognised. When writing about Darboven, I decided to think about writing more broadly, then think about music composition as writing and as art practice. Here I consider compositional techniques and ideas that surround this in theoretical texts.

I return to certain conventions of writing about art, considering the conditions and pre-conditions of the gaze through my own experience. My intention is to challenge what links the writing process to that of seeing and consider what it means to think through the use of language when imagining the work of art. Throughout this project I have identified in my writing process a method of thinking through the activity of writing, which has created an element of self-reflection in the writing that follows. For H  l  ne Cixous, writing is informed by experience, daily and culturally, historically and emotionally, and I identify with her claim of being a witness to memory, of writing though an apprenticeship of reading. While I reference many art history theory

thinkers (Peter Osborne, Robert Storr, Giles Deleuze, John Berger and Douglas Crimp), I have also brought in other writers such as Susan Handelman, George Steiner and Marc-Alain Ouaknin, to challenge the conventions of my own interpretation. I consider creativity outside of art, in the work of Samuel Beckett and Arnold Schoenberg for example, and by thinking about specific artworks by contemporary artists, such as Petra Feriancova, Zbyněk Baladrán, Adam Broomberg and Oliver Chanarin, I see this project as presenting ideas that could provide a method for further research to develop beyond this thesis.

The intention of research

Like any concept or object, the image does not exist on its own terms, independent of language and therefore independent of the world from which it comes. An image is, to some extent, contextualised prior to our engagement with it. This engagement allows for another instance of contextualising, as we place it into our own understanding of the visual world we encounter daily. This position allows us to think about the visual world in terms of our experience of language in writing and speech, as well as our own private thoughts that we may not articulate publicly, but that help us to situate our experiences. This thesis considers the ways in which our cultural and social (and therefore our political and philosophical) engagement with the world is informed and experienced through a use of language. When actively engaging with our experiences, when thinking about how we remember an event or define our position in relation to the event, there is an internalising process that is embedded in our use of language. This can involve a dialectical process that incorporates a method of articulation similar to how we might write about our experiences. So while this process is communicated through speech, or considered in private thought, there is a linguistic element that helps us to develop the narratives that build our lives.

Rarely is there a single version of any event, so my intention is to recognise and present how the use of language can impact on how an event is universally recalled – what is said and unsaid. Language in written or spoken form can affirm or alter our engagement with the work of art, but it can also help us to realise the impact of events and ideas outside of the engagement with art, which has an effect on our experience of the artwork. This helps me to identify the moments of complexity when attempting to separate biography from the art form, but also to consider and question assumptions of passive reading that are significant in the discussion of art practice. As we develop our thinking about the use language to articulate the experience of art, we are able to recognise the potential to engage with our own experiences and to cross between the threshold of a universal and specific interpretation. It allows the potential to open dialogue on the spaces between collective and personal thinking and how one relates to this in a creative practice.

There remains a gap between the artist's activity of making and the writer's or curator's activity of placing the artwork into a social and historical setting, when the artist's activity of making is discussed and contextualised within the art historical framework. By offering a variant on other literary writing methods through an element of self-reflection in my writing processes, I propose that there are ways of disrupting the received norms of interpretation that might also challenge the moments when what one thinks is a personal experience is in fact the experience of another captured through, for example, an art history book, journal essay or exhibition press release. While these interpretations are valid, I want the reader to see further potential through their own experiences and engagements beyond the experience of art. By bringing together different modes of writing and the discussion of different creative practices, one can re-evaluate the experience of art and consider alternative approaches to this experience. It also allows one to consider the artist's thinking process, which occurs through the activity of making.

Key themes

I have identified the key themes of ‘Textuality’ and ‘Reading’ in the context of project. I will now extend the notion of the *image* and the theme of thinking-through-making. The idea of the ‘metaphor’ is another area of interest, but one that I will explain in relation to writers’ theories that have impacted on this research. I will also focus on ideas that relate to my Jewish heritage and the resulting ideas, which are the background to in the background to this paper.

The image

The words ‘image’ and ‘metaphor’ regularly appear in interpretative texts, and come up several times in this project. When I use these words I do so with reference to art history writing, but also to a wider consideration of what the image means today. When thinking about the image in terms of its relationship to language, Cixous provides a method for engagement. She believes that the image is based on metaphor, therefore language is in place at the point the eye looks upon an image, even if we are unable, at that moment, to organise the words to describe the experience, for these metaphors “come forth before proper words or ideas.”⁵ From this one can assume that, for Cixous, metaphoric language is always, in part at least, relatable to the visual. Therefore the image is based on language, but what defines an image, and what sets one image apart from another in terms of what ‘type’ of image it is? When I write of the image here, I am thinking in terms of a physical object rather than the mental images constructed in the imagination. Our responses to the image in visual culture, has shifted greatly over the course of history. The advent of the Internet has affected our relationship with images as points of reference, for knowledge, but also in terms of how we position ourselves within the wider social and cultural context. There has been

⁵ Ibid. See author’s references to Derrida quoting Rousseau.

a decreasing importance placed on the linear perspective, now have a multiple of perspectives available to us, with diverging vanishing points, creating an unstable, multifaceted perspective. This is spurred on by the development of new technologies for surveillance and tracking, Google Maps and the endless aerial and over views we now have at our disposal, allowing us to see the world from all angles with multiple images surfacing on our computer screens. While this new vision may seem to establish a more realistic method for engaging with the visual world, going against the abstract flat line of the traditional horizon line that communicated a mathematical, homogenous space. Instead we become an “imaginary floating observer”⁶, with an imaginary stable ground that is no more *real* than the imaginary stable observer and horizon found in the traditional linear perspective. These different modes of visibility affect our orientation and with it, our concepts of time and space. We are left without a sense of stability, for these rest precariously on an imaginary stable ground. A whole world of communication and understanding has opened up, for we are no longer limited to the definition of time and space prescribed by the horizontal line. The world beyond that horizon line is no longer mute, and our location and relation to this location are no longer stable.

Art provided a means of questioning the notion of a linear perspective much earlier than Google Maps and modern technology. In the mid-19th century, J.W. Turner was destabilising the horizon line, with vanishing points dissolving, but not completely disregarded.⁷ During the Twentieth Century a series of developments challenged our approach to art. The advent of cinema was a shift in perspective, supplementing photography with varying temporal perspectives, while painting continued to further abandon representation with new forms of abstraction found in Expressionism and Cubism. Other challenges to our understanding of real representation included the

⁶ [Hito Steyerl, *The Wretched of the Screen* \(Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2012\), 24.](#)

⁷ [Ibid., 21.](#)

Impressionists and Fauvists' use and application of colour, distorting the way we engage with visual representation. Furthermore, with time and space reimagined through the theory of relativity and quantum physics, the perception of the world shifts and again as a result of warfare and advertisement. This brief history of the visual world provides a base from which to consider the works of two German artists working at the end of the 20th century.

When we consider what we term as the image, we could reflect on images found within the context of an artwork, or the image of the artwork as found in monographs, online and in journals. When looking at the abstracted image as found in art, we can think in terms of a visual representation that marks a departure from the familiar image of the subject being represented. In painting, abstraction refuses the reappearance of a source, separated from identification with notions of reality, and so resistant to the specificity of the subject. We can consider whether the parts that make up the image are returnable to the original subject or idea from which they derive, and what it is about the image that makes it so. This is the case with the practice of Richter, and I will discuss this through further ideas surrounding the image addressed by Georges Didi-Huberman, who speaks of the *tear-image*, *montage-image*, and the *lacuna-image*, as a method for approaching rescued photographic prints from Auschwitz. In the case of Darboven's practice, we might first ask where the image is, for during the process of writing about the artwork and the *writtenness* found within the work, the identification of archival material, and the sound of the musician playing the 'composition' found in the work, there is a sense of an absence of image in the traditional sense, which I will address.

The image can also be made up of several images, captured in the mind's eye, or in the photographed image of the artwork: parts taken from the work to substantiate ideas found in textbooks, for example. This *image-object*, as I will call it, can seem to act not merely as a substitute for the work of art, but as a stand-in for the original. When

one breaks down the parts of the image into those that are visually available and those that are non-visual, the presence of other associated ideas that construct this experience of the artwork can be realised. These subjects, based on a construction of ideas, relate to other lived moments, while experience can also be created in hindsight. It may also occur as a consequence of reading prior to or after the experience of looking.

Thinking through making

The interpretation of the physical and conceptual aspects of the artwork is often based on interpretation of form and content, and that, which visually and conceptually makes up the work of art. Contemporarily, creative techniques have been analysed more closely with conceptual ideas, resulting in meaning being found beyond the materiality of the object, and with reference to methodology. The curator or art historian will discuss this with reference to the artist's contemporaries and their influences, using quotations taken from sourced biographical information to help translate material choice into meaning. This is a process that I have followed when writing about an artist, for example for the Tate Collection, for commercial galleries, and when writing about artists for independent projects. It was the manner in which I first approached writing about the artists for this project. However as I continued to think about specific artworks by Richter and Darboven, I began to consider what might happen if one strips away all the theoretical and philosophical language from our experience of art, to consider what is left to be identified, and how we might contextualise this independently of the opinions of other people. Forced to think of the physicality of the artwork itself, one has to bring in different experiences, and recognise how other non-literary moments can provide an alternative route to approaching the artwork. This leads us to understand how much other literary moments impact on our experiences, and that language in other forms are active in the engagement.

I come to this with my experience of writing about art and the experience of writing, not as an artist, but as a curator, art historian and viewer of art practice. Working alongside artists who use text as part of their practice, I often consider the written form as if it were an object: ‘art writers’ consider their position as artists and therefore the writing becomes material. They talk about the activity of the writer as a *gesture*, the notion of going to the edges of the page, the *unfinished*, and what these modes of activity mean on a visual as well as a conceptual level. The experience of engaging with such thinking has affected my relationship with the written and spoken word, it has become a much more ‘conscious’ activity and one that seeks to identify elements in the work of art that recognise moments of the thinking process. ‘Art Writing’ sets a precedent for how one might approach the thinking behind the activity of making art. It welcomes thinking about the parts of an artwork in relation to the finished and unfinished, the made and unmade, but it also reflects on the process of conceptualising ideas into an object and the impact that it has on the audience. One is able to recognise these aspects in artworks made in two-dimensional and sculptural form, to reconsider how the material elements operate and how the *gesture* of making might impact on our interpretation and experience of the work of art. The writing process presented in the chapters that follow is an attempt to respond to the thinking and editing processes of the making activity. Through this, language becomes enveloped in the thinking and thus the response to the activity of constructing and navigating ideas. As a result of thinking about the material elements through language, I am able to extrapolate more from the thinking that occurs during the making process. Rather than leaving the making process sealed off to the viewer, there is the potential to draw more from the experience of art and to consider the artist’s practice beyond the artwork in the wider visual world.

Simon Critchley has talked about contemporary art practice as *unmaking*⁸, which provides another potential for thinking about how one ‘makes’ the artwork in the first place. One can interpret this *unmaking* as a postmodern situation that could act as a methodology for new ways of thinking about form and modes of expression in art, for one recognises this as an approach to what is already realised, established, and ready to be deconstructed. When I speak of the tradition of art history, I reference my own experience of study and work, of carrying out research so as to identify the ‘significance’ of works of art for commercial and intellectual purposes. I am following the tradition of reading theoretical texts and monographic books with essays by eminent art historians, taking this to establish links, and then *unmaking* these links so as to consider alternative methods for positioning artworks. By doing so, I believe that I draw on my practice as a curator as well as a writer, discussing the artist’s practice through the making process, to write texts that refer to the artist’s experience of realisation, and my experience of understanding the work within the context it was made and exhibited.

The moments when I write self-reflectively about the activity of writing and reading in response to the art object highlight the challenges that I faced when thinking about writing about art, while acting out the activity of writing with reference to my experiences. This presented a challenge, especially when approaching the work of Darboven, when focusing on the moments when her practice takes on ‘writteness’, when the writing becomes the art object. Therefore, I would suggest that I am also engaged with the activity of thinking through writing; this being the reason for claiming that my practice is one embedded in theory.

By thinking more about the activity of making in relation to the organisation, application and editing of the materials that occur during the making process, we bring

⁸ Simon Critchley, “In Conversation” (Talk, Whitechapel Art Gallery, London, September 28, 2014).

alternative, personal experiences into the engagement and therefore gain more from the work itself. My aim is to draw more from the experience of art by considering the artist's activity of making as a process of thinking. This includes the choices the artist makes when selecting and using his or her materials and the editing that takes place during the making process. Throughout, this activity will be referred to as 'thinking-through –making' or 'thinking-as-making.'

Jewish Culture and the Post-Holocaust discourse

Much of the engagement with art as presented in this MPhil is an attempt to consider the potential of how language functions in relation to artistic practice. By taking on elements related to how text behaves, and how language is understood in Judaism, my intention is to present ways in which alternative routes can be approached to experience art, and also how one can engage with art through different literary methods. Key to my thinking, which I will demonstrate throughout, is that an image cannot exist on its own independently of language and therefore, independently of the world from which it comes. With reference to this position, there are ways of approaching the artwork and the notion of the image through Jewish thinking. This relates to the self-reflective aspect of the writing, for I am conscious that my Jewish upbringing has impacted on how I engage with 'visual' representation and the intellectual thinking that surrounds art practice.

As a consequence, I have developed this project while reading about topics that relate specifically to Jewish cultural history and experience. Marc-Alain Ouaknin's *The Burnt Book* provided an introduction to several ideas that return throughout this project. For example, he considers the ancient Hebrew language, its composition and how this language is traditionally approached in Judaism, as a method to engage with modern and contemporary philosophy. When thinking in terms of Derrida's idea of the 'trace,' Ouaknin recognises this as a method for disturbing notions of presence and

continuity, for it becomes a way to represent the unsaid and the moments in-between seeing and not seeing. He writes that the trace behaves as a simulacrum of a presence, which “dislocates itself, displaces itself, postpones itself, it properly speaking does not take place because the effacing is part of its structure.”⁹ I believe this position is key to a reading of the following chapters on Richter’s and Darboven’s work.

In his book *Downcast Eyes: the Denigration of Vision in Twentieth- Century French Thought*, Martin Jay examines the ‘ocularcentric discourse’ that he believes can be traced from the Greeks to contemporary French philosophy. Early on he explains that the ancient Greeks privileged vision, but in doing so, relegated the other senses to a subordinate position that lessened the significance of language in western culture. He explains:

Language was deemed inferior to sight as the royal road to the truth. It was the realm, as we have noted, of mere *doxa* (opinion) instead. Rhetoric was thus banished from genuine philosophy. Even when the Greeks discussed verbal phenomena like metaphors, they tended to reduce them to transparent figures, likenesses that were mimetic resemblances, not the interplay of sameness and difference.¹⁰

Jay begins by acknowledging the “ubiquity of visual metaphors” used in language and suggests that if we focus more vigilantly on these metaphors, we can gain insight into the “complex mirroring of perception and language.”¹¹ Furthermore, he claims that the rise of postmodern thought is tied in with a revival of interest among French intellectuals in Jewish thinking, around the 1970s and 1980s. He focuses on Levinas as the central figure responsible for this development to reveal “the unexpected links between the traditional iconoclastic Jewish attitude towards visual representation and a

⁹ Marc-Alain Ouaknin, *The Burnt Book: Reading the Talmud* (Princeton, N.J, Princeton University Press, 1998) 74.

¹⁰ Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought* (University of California Press, 1993), 33.

¹¹ *Ibid.* 1.

powerful antiocular impulse in postmodernism.”¹² For, as he writes: “If postmodernism teaches anything, ... it is to be suspicious of single perspectives.” Like all grand narratives, he says, they can often provide a totalising account of a word, “too complex to be reduced to a unified point of view.”¹³

While Jay’s writing is useful, my own engagement with art specifically attempts to consider the potential for how language functions in relation to art practice. I will take aspects of Jewish thought in order to do this, particularly tracing aspects of the relationship with the image and the word in Judaism.

The second of the 10 Commandments reads: “Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image.” According to Joseph Gulmann, for some critics a literal interpretation of this would mean discounting any possibility of the visual arts in Judaism, claiming that it states the position of the Jew as a person concerned with the spirituality of God, rather than the Greek worship of form. “The Jew,” he writes, “is more an ‘aural’ than a ‘visual’ being; his feelings relate more to time than to space, and his primary concern is with God’s word, not God’s picture.” Therefore, while denied a talent for the visual, the Jew instead excels in the “splendour and rapture of the word.”¹⁴

Reading in Judaism involves a process of interpretation. One has to consider the Hebrew word with reference to the potential of more than one meaning, complicated further by it being found within a sentence constructed without punctuation. The biblical texts in Judaism point inwards towards its own network of relations and verbal, textual ambiguities. Thus, the ancient language activates the reader in making sense and in creating meaning, to form the layers of metaphor, allegory, and tangible translation.

¹² Ibid. 546.

¹³ Ibid. 545.

¹⁴ Joseph Gulmann, “The ‘Second Commandment’ and the Image in Judaism,” *Hebrew Union College Annual*, 32 (1961): 161–74. [Accessed January 12 2016]

The meaning of the term for ‘word’ itself is significant when thinking about the distinction between the Jewish and Greek world. Susan Handelman quotes Hans-Georg Gadamer to explain that Greek philosophy begins with the insight that “a word is only a name” and therefore does not represent a “true being”. Indeed, the Greek term for word *onoma* is synonymous with *name*, while the Hebrew term, *davar*, means not only *word* but also *thing*.¹⁵ The indetermination of the term *davar* precisely explains the Jewish relationship with language and the importance of study and analysis in Judaism. It also highlights that a word is never fully representative of what it stands in for and so translation is always in flux. However, in Judaism, a rabbinical reading always returns back to a study of the word. There is nothing beyond or outside of language. Therefore there is no separateness of the image from the world within which it takes place.

Considering further the meaning and interpretation of the Second Commandment, it is interesting to note the ways in which Jewish artists worked around the law, which in turn differed according to century and interpretation. While the Talmud takes a strict stance on producing faces for fear of idolatry, bans on creative pursuits differed. So for example, in the 16th century, the Shulkhan Arukh¹⁶ extended the ban on creating three-dimensional and bas-relief images that, it was thought, could be worshipped. This again differed from the Talmud that allowed two-dimensional images of the human body, as long as some part of the human form remained out of sight¹⁷

¹⁵ Susan A. Handelman, *Slayers of Moses: The Emergence of Rabbinic Interpretation in Modern Literary Theory* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1983), 3–4.

¹⁶ The legal code known as the Shulkhan Arukh, compiled by the great Sephardic rabbi Joseph Caro in the mid 1500s, is still the standard legal code of Judaism. See “Jewish Virtual Library,” http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Judaism/shulkhan_arukh.html. [Accessed October 8 2016]

¹⁷ “My Jewish Learning Website,” <http://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/ask-the-expert-graven-images/>. [Accessed October 8, 2016]

In order to escape the issue of the prohibition, one has to show that there cannot be an exact translation of an original object or being into an image. In fact the Jewish act of turning away provides an alternative proposition: rather than *distrust* the image, one places it into language to recognize the potential of different meaning and understanding that can be associated with what we encounter. By doing so we can show that an image can never exist on its own terms, without the viewer adding or taking away parts of its being. By accepting the image on these terms, one is able to recognize the possibility and potential of using language in the act of engagement and interpretation. Furthermore, by accepting that ideas and thoughts that relate back to the experience are based in the visual and linguistic world that surrounds us, are therefore at play during the encounter with the image, language is once again elevated and used to analyse, articulate, and to communicate these experiences.

One might counter-argue that, by considering the use of language in order to describe the experience of the artwork, we may instead detract from the experience. I would maintain that, by thinking in terms of how we use language, and going beyond what we traditionally read in order to experience the work of art, we are able to gain new perspectives on the experience. In fact, by thinking that there is a possibility of experience outside of language, we begin to rely on a rather limited language and to close down the potential for new literary and non-literary engagement.

By contesting a Christian transcendental experience of looking, we open up [the](#) possibilities of engagement with the artwork and resist allowing art, or the image it creates, to be silent. My argument is that the visual does not exist beyond or outside of language: that the visible and therefore the image that art can render, comes as a consequence of being in language. By recognising the continuous participation of language in the experience of art, we are able to unfix the image of art from stillness, and from rendering it mute. Paul Klee is much quoted as saying that “Art does not

reproduce the visible, rather, it renders the visible.”¹⁸ Therefore art shows us something previously unseen, and while in this quotation he speaks of the visible, I would add that, in order to render the visible, to think in terms of the conceptual through language, we can reinstate other senses (be it sound or smell) to recognise the multiple experiences that we bring. This reinforces the fact that there can never be one perspective.

Jewish Thought and its impact on interpretation: The influences of Jacques Derrida and Hélène Cixous

This thesis considers the work of two non-Jewish German artists, born during World War II, and active in the years following it. Recognising the link between my own cultural background and choices of reading, I attempt to consider their practices through an engagement with language that is informed by my own experience of art and reading, with reference to what could be described as a ‘Jewish methodology’ of thinking.

Jacques Derrida’s *Glas*¹⁹ combines a reading of Hegel’s work with Jean Genet’s autobiographical writing,²⁰ so there are two parallel narratives occurring at one time, with explanations and musings around the edges of the page, as though on the periphery but still relevant. This is an obvious example of how Derrida places an expectation on his reader to negotiate moments between narratives and his commentary. The reader becomes the writer, for the narrative unfolds through one’s engagement. Not only are there similarities between how one reads *Glas* and the

¹⁸ Alex Danchev, “Paul Klee: Making Visible,” *Times Higher Education*, October 17, 2013.

¹⁹ Jacques Derrida, *Glas*, (Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press, 1986).

²⁰ Jane Marie Todd, “Autobiography and the Case of the Signature: Reading Derrida’s *Glas*”, *Comparative Literature* 38, no. 1, 1986, <<http://www.jstor.org>> [Accessed 24th May 2014].

expectations of reading in Judaism, but the layout of the essays found alongside Derrida's commentary shares the visual elements that comprise the Talmud.²¹

Glas presents an example of the influence of Jewish thinking and writing on Derrida, but in broader terms, there is evidence of this throughout his work. For Derrida, language has neither ideas nor sounds that exist before the linguistic system, but rather only conceptual and phonic differences issued from the same arrangement. He contests the idea of speech as presence, transparency, and authenticity, for he believes, like writing, that it is a representation dependent on a mediating system of language. When writing in terms of the signified and the signifier, Derrida describes the signified as the concept and the signifier as the 'image'. According to Derrida, the signified is never present in and of itself, is never a presence that refers only to itself, but instead, like all concepts, is inscribed to a chain of systems that refer to the other.²²

In Judaism, Ouaknin tells us, there is no such thing as a passive receiving of 'Tradition' and reactivating the text, which is a tradition recurring throughout the year in the synagogue and in the home, "awakens the creative force of interpretation."²³

This form of reading can provide freedom from a social language, for the analysis between the ancient texts can provide an alternative interpretation of the present. We can recognise how this idea is played out in the writing of Walter Benjamin, when thinking about his understanding of history as subject to the structures within the present. This links to Derrida's deconstruction of language and his ideas on historicity and the archive. Specific ideas relate to a notion that historicism manufactures its own unimaginable, as presented by Didi-Huberman in the discussion that follows on Richter, and thoughts on the archive, as set out in the discussion of Darboven.

²¹ The Talmud is the comprehensive written version of Jewish oral law containing subsequent commentaries.

²² Jacques Derrida and Alan Bass, *Margins of Philosophy*, Reprint edition (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 1984), 10–11.

²³ Ouaknin, *The Burnt Book*, 91.

Furthermore, when it comes to storytelling in Jewish culture, Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi tells us that classical rabbinic literature was never intended as historiography or ‘factual’ in the modern sense. He explains that while anachronism may be a flaw in historical writing, it can be a legitimate element of non-historical genres: “The rabbis ... were engrossed in an on-going exploration of the meaning of history bequeathed to them, striving to interpret it in living terms for their own and later generations.”²⁴ Meanwhile, the poetic and legendary elements were not fiction, as we would imagine them. For people in ancient times, these stories were “legitimate and sometimes inevitable modes of historical perception and interpretation.”²⁵ As an approach to narratives, to our relationship with our memory and our engagement with history, both specifically and universally, this becomes a technique for re-evaluating how we think about past and present experiences. It opens the possibility of new ways of determining events, of *rendering the visible*.

By believing that the image can take us beyond language, we close down our engagement with the image and therefore the event it is representative of. By thinking and challenging what we see through language, be it writing or reading, we are ensuring that conversations surrounding historical narratives continue.

I am conscious that the Jewish cultural heritage I speak of is related to a post-Holocaust discourse that impacts on the way that I, specifically, interpret art. My intention is to show that art can help us to challenge what we think can and cannot be presented, as we deal with the said and unsaid in relation to the Holocaust. I am conscious that this is *my* experience and that I am grappling with these notions to consider at what point it is personal and at what point I am presenting a theoretical

²⁴ Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory* (Seattle, University of Washington Press, 1982) 18.

²⁵ *Ibid*, 13.

position. This is certainly a consequence of my experience of working with artists thinking-through-making, hence the notion of theory as practice.

Derrida offers a method for engaging with language that refuses to bracket out the possibility of moving beyond a preconceived idea of context and concept. This can be used as a method for approaching the *images* that one renders through the experience of art, which can allow one to unfix the artwork from a muteness that can prevail over the engagement. By drawing out the implications of my practical experience, I intend to use my writing about art as a way to navigate and articulate the ‘thinking within making’ of the artists themselves, avoiding bracketing off ideas and thinking when engaging with the visual and non-visual elements of the artworks that I engage with. Here I will aim to take a situated approach to argue against the muteness and often sacredness of images, to reveal the continuous participation of language.

Turning to another genre of writing, I spent time interpreting and considering the experience of reading through the two essays found in *Veils*.²⁶ This book plays testament to Hélène Cixous and Jacques Derrida’s lifelong friendship based in writing, while their shared cultural experience of being Jewish Algerian exists in the background. The writing of each remains distinct in character and form; in many ways both essays seem foreign to each other. However, they deal with similar themes of autobiography, memory and confession. Derrida’s essay “A Silkworm of One’s Own” is an intricate literary web of thought based on autobiographical, religious and philosophical motifs, including a response to Cixous’s essay titled “Savoir.” Derrida plays out the gender differences between *la voile* (to sail) and *le voile* (veil), through metaphors and ancient stories. The seemingly *trivial* moments of storytelling

²⁶ Hélène Cixous, Jacques Derrida, *Veils* (Stanford, California, Stanford University Press, 2001).

destabilise traditional writing structures²⁷, to provide one with a method for reading. Meanwhile, Cixous's "Savoir" reads confidently as a piece of fiction: a narrative written in the first person recounting the experience of gaining sight after a lifetime of myopia. The writer moves around the city, grieving for the loss she feels by gaining sight after medical intervention, the word *savoir* (meaning to know), being played against *voir* (to see). Although recognisable in life, everything Cixous encounters seems to behave as a prop to her experience, enhanced with a magical element, made manifest through her use of language. This sensation is perhaps realised through the fictional nature of the piece, allowing Cixous to move between with may be termed as lying and truth-telling; yet it is impossible to substantiate where one ends and the other begins, as if there is no separation between the two. Furthermore, Cixous disrupts the ordering of experience, and in doing so encourages her reader to think about the way in which we respond to our own receptive skills.

Françoise Defromont has described Cixous's writing activity as a process of releasing the *literal* meaning of the word. So, rather than representing the figurative meaning, the "real living word breathes again and can be felt full of flesh."²⁸ Her writing and use of metaphoric language in her prose do not necessarily give thought 'flesh' in the bodily sense, as if part *of* the body. Instead, the words are *living* and *breathing*, sometimes rendering them unrecognisable through the writer's application. Thus, Cixous's ability is to create moments when we begin to distrust our own ideas of meaning, providing the potential for new meaning and different interpretations with each reading.

²⁷ K. Malcolm Richards, *Derrida Reframed: Interpreting Key Thinkers for the Arts* (London; New York, I.B.Tauris, 2008) 88–89. See Paul de Man, *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism* (1983).

²⁸ Françoise Defromont, "The Body and Text" in, Helen Wilcox and Keith McWatters, *The Body and Text: Helene Cixous, Reading and Teaching* (New York: Prentice-Hall, 1990), 117.

For Cixous, the conceptual and writing process is informed by experience, daily and culturally, historically and emotionally. Time is transient, yet specific moments remain in our conscious and inform our behaviour.²⁹ When approaching her writing method, one enters the realm of philosophy through the personal and biographical, and yet it is indecipherable as fiction, theory or biography. In her writing, we can recognise how moments of the universal quickly become specific, and when the writing disrupts the ordering of experience, she encourages us to think about the way in which we respond to our own receptive skills, challenging and revealing the subjectivity of writing as a method for engagement.

Cixous considers the body to be “an effect of linguistic processes”, so the visceral is related to the linguistic in the experience. As is the case for both Cixous and Derrida, writing commands the writing. However, Cixous is also concerned with a chain of literature and inherited resources, which she refers to as a conscious and unconscious memory of language, “as if it were a living being”. This is also imbued with a concern for the movement between writing the self and writing in response to literature, biography, theory and philosophy. Taking a cue from Adrian Rifkin, there is an approach to writing that might mean that one “drifts to the edges,” or perhaps in the case of Cixous, to the margins, and that one frees one’s self from being trapped in the literal, as a way of avoiding interpretation that returns everything to the same.³⁰

Cixous believes that our mind and body are a collection of metaphors. For Cixous, metaphors, the most primitive expression of language, are linked to images, which

²⁹ Hélène Cixous, “The Book as One of Its Own Characters”, *New Literary History*, *The Book as Character, Composition, Criticism and Creation*, 33, no. 3 (Summer 2002): 403–34.

³⁰ Adrian Rifkin, “From an Obstructed Viewpoint, Art-Writing-Image: How short is a sound, or how long does it take to think?” (First of four lectures presented as part of series, Iniva, October 9, 2012).

“come forth before proper words or ideas.”³¹ Language is therefore relatable to the visual, whether the subject is recognisable or imagined. We can recognise encountering art as a perception based on experience, either lived or remembered. Therefore, the parts that make up who we are *metaphorically* relate to how we experience art.

Literature has the ability to shift us between moments of reading and forgotten moments and experiences embedded in our memory. It can take us to unknown places and position us in the mind of another, but can also take us to places and people we once knew, reminding us of the emotional and physical aspects of these experiences. This is an easily recognisable experience of reading both fiction and non-fiction writing, and yet Cixous reminds us of this through her writing activity, playing it out as we read. When viewing art, private thought becomes active in the same way. Moments of clarity may arise with reference to our understanding of universally accepted ideas. We relate back to our own specific experiences and ideas, with what we imagine to be the ideas and experiences of the artist. And yet, as with Cixous’s writing, the parts that make up the work cannot always be summed up as one unified moment. This is something I recognise particularly as an aspect of much modern and contemporary art practice. Thinking about Cixous’s activity of writing has impacted on my reading of other authors beyond her writing, while it also informs the way that I have developed my own writing practice when engaging with the artworks of Richter and Darboven.

We can take ideas from Cixous to think about the moments when the ordering of experience is disrupted, and think more deeply about the way in which we respond to our own receptive skills. While Cixous is able to create moments when we distrust our own interpretation of meaning, the idea that this, in fact, can provide the potential for new meaning and different interpretations is key to my engagement with art. This

³¹ Ibid. See author’s references to Derrida quoting Rousseau.

becomes more relevant when we accept that the conceptual and making process is informed by experience, daily and culturally, historically and emotionally, while our interpretation is also embedded in these sources of understanding. So by thinking in these terms we can think about and challenge our own subjectivity during the encounter. Appreciating that time is transient and that specific moments remain in our consciousness to inform our responses at different times is also another method of thinking from Cixous that has impacted on how I consider the experience of art. Therefore, art can disrupt the ordering of experience, as writing does for Cixous. Therefore it is appropriate to reference Cixous's writing at moments throughout this thesis.

Rationale for research

Current forms of art historical writing involve thinking in terms of the artists' biography, the social and political moment when art is made, and the social and intellectual circles the artists associated themselves with. Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, who will be referenced later, is part of the generation that first took terms from artists and literary theorists, such as "ready-made" and "allegory" and "revealed and mobilized them as paradigms – as 'models and methods' – for identifying patterns of artistic practice throughout the twentieth century and across continents."³² Revisionist art history provides a method for thinking about the artworks I write about. It takes into account different social and cultural experiences, generating discussion on artists and patrons previously removed from art historical narratives, thereby redefining methods for interpreting art. While art historical methods of interpretation help to inform how I engage with an artist's practice, I am interested in looking at what else can affect our engagement with artworks, thinking about our relationship with materials and the

³² Christine Mehring, "Benjamin Buchloh, Art Historian," *Texte Zur Kunst* 26, no. 103 (September 2016): 182–86.

influence of our own histories and experience on how we relate to the artist's work. I believe that this can act as a method of engaging with the artists' methods of working. Considering the artist's relationship to theory through practice, and the experience of working with artists engaged in a writing practice that they define as art, have also affected my engagement with research and writing about what we consider to be art practice.

My writing about art has become embedded with nuances. At times becoming self-reflective, while embedded in theory, I challenge my own expectations when thinking about the traditional techniques used in art history discourse. I question certain expectations and habits found in interpretative texts and think in terms of what I have experienced working with contemporary artists, where the making process has become a thinking activity.

I first came to write about artworks by Richter and Darboven as a way of re-examining the conventions of interpretation, to consider how language functions in writing in response to the artwork, and to think about the result of a creative practice through certain theories that have been referenced when thinking specifically about these artists. Certain theories are developed and continue to inform perspectives that affect our engagement with an artist's practice. Therefore my first concern was to look at how this might, in fact, close down the potential for new or different perspectives with which to experience the artwork. By considering the artistic practice, and then the experience of encountering the complete artwork, I attempt to engage with what is visually available at the moment of encountering the artwork. This then allowed me to consider the parts that are potentially imagined, or related to conceptual thinking about art. As my engagement with art has been through writing for curatorial projects, journals, and the sale of artworks, I approach this by considering the 'gesture' and 'activity' of the writer, which involved revisiting writers who I had read when engaging with art, but also reading from other literary genres. While certain written

material, such as philosophical theory, has been referred to before in theories of art, I began to look at writing that remains, for the most part, outside of the conventions of such readership, to think about how this might bring in different perspectives and therefore new experiences of the artwork. For example, thinking about the meaning of terms such as “allegory” and “metaphor” as they are presented in other literature allows one to question how this translates when we use such terms to speak of art.

This thesis is a culmination of an attempt to bring forms of art and writing together, coming out of four years of working alongside artists whose academic and intellectual pursuit has been associated to their practice. This involved the exploration of (and an attempt to define) my own curatorial and writing practice, thus defining a practice that sits between art theory and a writing activity, at times by thinking in terms of a self-reflexive strategy.

My intention is to unfix the artwork from a projected stillness or muteness as a consequence of being often written about and presented in exhibitions. Here I use my experience to provide a more situated description of art, while drawing out the implications of my practical experience of working with artists as a method for thinking about artworks produced by two established artists. As a consequence I plan to articulate, in writing, what I have found to be a thinking within and through the making process of art.

Methodology: my curatorial and writing practice

This project is the culmination of my experience in the art world, defined by the direct engagement with art practice. The methodology for this project is a result of my experience of studying Art History, then working for museums, galleries and art magazines, as well as undertaking an MA in Curating in 2004-05. The result of the latter further added to this consideration of the activity of reading and writing around

the artwork, but also an engagement with artists that began as curating and developed to become a writing practice.

Thinking in the intellectual and visual/object-based space of the Art Research Department, one realises that the contemporary artist's activity is very much one of a producer, relating to intellectual, emotional and philosophical thinking through notions of the visual world. This thinking and creative activity can manifest itself in various practical and conceptual ways. Whether we identify the practice as either one form or several, be it painting, sculpture, film, photography, writing or a sound-piece, it is the remnants of the making and thinking activity that is found in the final artwork. Furthermore, much art from the 1960s onwards has a strong conceptual component, even when relating back to the visual world that surrounds us. This sets a precedent for the contemporary artist working today. Materials and ideas are sourced from disparate places and broad avenues of intellectual thinking, which can result in a greater expectation placed on the viewer.

While my engagement with artists often begins as working as a curator and the process of developing presentations, in recent years this has evolved into a writing practice. The writing acts as a supporting medium for the artist's work, and provides an opportunity for conversation pieces that bring aspects of my own interpretation, my own reading and research, but also my own experiences, into the conversation. The opportunity of residencies has helped me to develop this in a number of ways. For example, when interviewing artists about their studio practice,³³ I recognised that when developing a practice they often took a methodical approach that involved planning the activity of making, working in a specific, almost habitual way, adding or subtracting to the final object, piece by piece – brushstroke by brushstroke – day by day. In many ways this is similar to a traditional method for writing and more in

³³ Residency at The Luminary (St Louis, MO, USA, June- July 2014), <http://theluminaryarts.com/programs/residency-program/rebecca-harris>.

keeping with the traditions of research than I imagined. Furthermore, by developing a video essay as a result of a residency at Kunsthuis SYB³⁴, I worked with artist Ruth Legg to realise the activity of telling a narrative through a technical process of making.

These experiences have impacted on my understanding of art making and the process of research and writing about Richter and Darboven's art practice, as much as my own curatorial and writing practice.

The research and writing techniques developed during this project have resulted in two techniques emerging in my writing practice. Firstly, the self-reflective approach to research and the writing up of my intellectual engagement with art. My approach to writing is therefore, influenced by specific experiences, underlined by an attempt to engage with art as learned through studying Art History, which considers a broader, universal consideration of the experience. Secondly, I have developed a tangential approach to the gathering and interpretation of research, which is the result of navigating the self-reflective approach to interpretation alongside the engagement with art within the context of an MPhil. This latter activity is in keeping with the experience of working alongside practice-based researchers developing work, to then reflect intellectually on this within the context of the Art Department.

An artwork can reinforce, or conflict with, an intellectual position. It can produce an internal emotional response in one person that contrasts with the response of another. Furthermore, the emotional and intellectual experience can conflict, and so I wonder whether we propose an intellectual position as a result of our inability to grasp the associations we find that relate to our own emotional or ethical response. Throughout this thesis, I will continue to question the relationship between what one sees and what one thinks, and consider the activity of the two in the moment of encountering art. I

³⁴ Visiting writer as part of "Quietly My Broadcast: Residency of Ruth Legg." (Kunsthuis SYB, Friesland, The Netherlands, June - August 2011), http://www.kunsthuisyhb.nl/nu/quietly-my-broadcast/persbericht_engels.html.

wonder too, how much we set the conditions for the experience of art, based on what we expect to encounter, before in fact engaging with the work itself.

When interpreting the artwork, one considers all the details that make up the object: the materiality, the possibility of a narrative, the size, and date. The art historian will then consider a broader range of ideas that associate materials to narratives circulating the artwork – the socio-historical and political events that surround the date the work was produced, and how this could potentially relate back to the biographical details of the artist. Through this process of engagement, the artist's legacy is formed and artworks become associated with particular schools of thought. While recognising this as a legitimising activity, I will engage the viewer in the activity of making and place this in line with the activity of thinking. Using this as a method for re-evaluating the artist's practice, one can think about the activity of thinking in language, how we construct methods for thinking about artworks in language and therefore, activate the potential for new forms of engagement. Through my own looking at works of art with reference to alternative forms of writing and to considering my own personal experience of writing in response to well-known artworks, part of the intention of this project is to lead the reader through certain modes of writing and to think about this in terms of art.

The activity of writing is closely linked to the act of reading. Whether it is reading to inform one's own writing, returning to writing once read, reading one's own writing, the writer is constantly returning to the text, and hence the privileging of *reading* in the title of this thesis. Reading is part of the writing process when engaging with art practice, and within this reading process there are moments of interruption, when one has to think about the word used to describe the experience. While this activity of reading-writing may interrupt the moment of engagement with an artwork, it can also offer potential for thinking more broadly about the artwork through the language that we use. I consider this a method for my writing activity. By returning to art historical

narratives and approaching the artworks through the personal experience of reading, by thinking more deeply about these other moments of reading, I am able to take the reader to the moments of my own reading to provide another kind of insight, and open up this experience to new perspectives on that engagement.

The idea of negotiation,³⁵ as used in recent cultural studies,² denotes action that takes place within the structural constraints of power but at the same time resists such constraints. Negotiation involves both acting within the parameters set by social constraints and simultaneously developing and using strategies to subvert domination and control.³⁵

This interpretation of the word ‘negotiate’ relates to my experiences of the process of engaging with known artworks through writing, while attempting to bring other experiences of art and reading together with art historical and critical writing. Using a practice of writing embedded in theory, I relate to the shifting aspect described in this quotation; this takes place when I work with the theoretical text and the artwork, while being conscious of my engagement and the self-awareness that I have as a writer.

As I said earlier, Hélène Cixous’s writing sets a precedent for critical writing, for she presents a method for interrogating themes that run through my research – a method that allows for both self-reflectivity and criticality. For Cixous, writing and reading involve a single gesture and are part of a continuously built whole. The *writtenness* of her work gives a voice to writing, but it also resists over-generalisation. Rather than looking at artwork with the expectation of some form of return, my aim is to present methods for thinking about the engagement through our own lived experiences and knowledge. This facilitates a more social engagement, one that recognises different forms of thinking and therefore writing; one that activates other narratives around the encounter. By doing so, I also aim to resist over-generalisation and instead open the

³⁵ [Jennifer McLerran and Thomas Patin, *Artwords: A Glossary of Contemporary Art Theory* \(Westport, Conn: Greenwood, 1997\), 90.](#)

potential of experience that relates to our bodies and minds in the space of the encounter.

Chapter one

Dialectics of the imaginable. On Gerhard Richter's *Grey* paintings

In this chapter, Georges Didi-Huberman's writing is brought together with the work of Gerhard Richter. This will enable me to consider how we encounter images and how we negotiate our proximity to, and experience of, the past. Richter's practice allows us to consider how we define an image in the first place, and how we determine the meaning behind an artwork when faced with what appears to be an image representative of past events. I will negotiate ideas that can be linked to what one imagines is visually present in the image and evaluate what one finds as one's imagination is activated through engagement. As outlined in the introduction, when referring to the 'imagination' I am describing the moment when we consciously think about our experiences and consider what is being perceived with what we already know. This is an almost dialectical moment when we engage our intellectual and emotional reaction, when we relate specific experience with universal understanding to form a personal reaction. My aim is to provide a methodology for thinking about the moments of visual perception when we become aware of the specific and universal elements that make up a response to contemporary art practice. Furthermore, to consider the artist's practice beside that of the writer's, in order to consider how both individuals think through the activity of doing. By doing so I will consider how we can allow our response to art to reflect on the processes of making and creating artworks.

In an interview with Nicolas Serota, Director of Tate, in 2011, Gerhard Richter speaks of the four images that Georges Didi-Huberman presents and writes about in *Images in Spite of All*. He says:

It's a stunning book – you see a concentration camp yard, with people walking around in it quite calmly, moving corpses – except you only see that when you look more closely. Like nice gardeners ... there's an appalling contrast between the contents and the look of the picture. But if I did anything with that, it would just be too spectacular.

And later he says,

...it has huge impact as a small, framed photograph. I couldn't add anything to it; if I turned it into a much larger painting, it would probably only be to its detriment.³⁶

Richter says very little else on the subject of this book and its content. It is the very mention of the book and the idea of what it means for Richter to consider it during a discussion on his practice that provides an opportunity to think about how we engage with the artist's oeuvre. It provides us with a point from which to consider this practice in relation to history and the images that circulate the narratives of historical events. Richter states his position on the rescued prints and the decision to refrain from creating paintings *as* an artist who is actively engaged with the activity of thinking-through-making. He is considering the *potential* for making an artwork from the subject, both conceptually and as a physical painted artwork.³⁷

In *Images in Spite of All*, Didi-Huberman uses the term “investigate” to describe the way in which he approaches the activity found in the images and the ideas that circulate the engagement with them. The author pulls apart what is visually available in the photographs, thinking through the experience of film and associated archival

³⁶ Gerhard Richter, interview titled: “I have nothing to say and I'm saying It” Nicholas Serota, *Gerhard Richter: Panorama* (London: Tate Publishing, 2011), 25 On the occasion of “Gerhard Richter: Panorama”, Tate Modern, London, 6th October 2011- 8th January 2012.

³⁷ Since this chapter was written, Richter produced four paintings titled *Birkenau*, (oil on canvas, 2014, 260 cm x 200 cm, Catalogue Raisonné: 937-1 - 4, www.gerhard-richter.com). A response to these paintings can be found in the Appendix.

material. He recognises the photographs as an “extreme case” within the known corpus of visual documents found after Auschwitz.

The only moment when Didi-Huberman makes any sort of reference to art in *Images in Spite of All* is when he writes, “...how could an image act of that kind be prescribed or even interpreted by any thought, however just, on the exercise of art?”³⁸ By a close reading of Didi-Huberman’s interpretation of non-art images, one is able to think about how we engage with the past through visual documentation and what the visual can or cannot provide to support our understanding of an event. When we consider the parts of the visual that are considered to be useful as a document of the past, we are able to think more about the parts that remain outside of our immediate understanding. Didi-Huberman’s question is pertinent to my own interpretation of his essay next to my interpretation of Richter’s paintings, for it provides a way of thinking about the artist’s practice with reference to notions of figuration and abstraction. Further still, it provides a method for thinking about how one interprets the visual world outside of art, in order to then return to the engagement with artworks and to think about the experience, whether in an attempt to interpret or not. Didi-Huberman considers how we look as an ethical issue. We are able to understand that when we are engaging with an object, be it art or not, we are always approaching it with ideas and associations to the subject matter, through which we ask questions of it.

In *Images in Spite of All*, Didi-Huberman presents a relentless consideration of four prints rescued from Auschwitz, taking visual and non-visual research, alongside the

³⁸ Georges Didi-Huberman, *Images in Spite of All: Four Photographs from Auschwitz*, Reprint edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 27. Quotation taken from Maurice Blanchot, *L’écriture du désastre* (Paris: Gallimard, 1980, 132). ‘There is a limit at which the exercise of an art, whatever it be, becomes an insult to misfortune.’ Didi-Huberman quotes Blanchot after describing Claude Lanzmann’s film *Shoah* as a sequence “composed according to formal choices and an extreme engagement with the question of the *figurable*.” He then mentions Jochen Gerz’s *Dachau-Projekt* and *Monument against Racism* referring to the commentary the works give rise to.

writing of his critics, to attempt a method for thinking about the four small prints. We witness a constant shift between text and imagery that shifts the imagination and our own engagement with his writing and the images. This culminates in an engagement with the author's personal attempt to speak (and write) what he declares is 'the unsayable', and which continues to be refused within these irrefutable images from Auschwitz.

When engaging with these found prints, Didi-Huberman takes different aspects of visual and non-visual research material, including film and archival documents, along with the writing of his critics. I see the technique used by Didi-Huberman as a way of thinking about the potential of writing, and thinking about the visual world, through different cultural and historical references. This links to my notion of *textuality* as a method of thinking about the image through the use of language in writing and speech. By thinking of the visual world as being based on our use of language, we are able to see that our lives are narratives enveloped in our own use of language, for words set our experiences into motion. This technique provides a way to think about our relationship with the visual world we encounter daily and through our living memory that can impact on our experience of art practice.

Reading, as when engaging with visual or aural experiences, can affect our imagination to shift us emotionally and intellectually – taking us to another place or time, or altering our perspective of the past and indeed, the present we inhabit. This happens when words appear loaded with meaning, depending on what we read and how we engage with the text. Thinking in terms of this claim, I believe that Gerhard Richter has the ability to place the viewer in a situation where there is an emotional as well as an intellectual response to historical narrative. A tension remains between what is represented and what is found. Questions over what the image is communicating back to us keep the enquiry into the artist's intention and thus, a sense of the unresolved, active. By drawing out themes that can be linked to the thinking that

occurs in the activity of making, I will show that thinking and language remain a constant within the image. And by thinking about this as a method for evaluating the experience of art, we are able to draw out the thinking-through- making that takes place in contemporary art practice.

Contemporary artists source materials from disparate parts of the visual and non-visual world, brought together to create an alternative perspective. I recognise this as similar to the method used by Didi-Huberman in order to write *Image in Spite of All*. While my intention is to show that responding to Didi-Huberman's writing provides a method for re-evaluating the work by Richter., I also aim to present a discussion that relates to art in broader terms and how we might consider the artist's activity of thinking through making to gain an alternative perspective of the artist's practice. By approaching Didi-Huberman's *Image in Spite of All* in response to Richter's practice, I am able to present a method for engaging with art that relates to my experience of working with practising artists.

Images in Spite of All: Didi-Huberman's methodology for writing on images

Turning to Didi-Huberman's book, I will explain the 'content' of the photographic negatives: the first sequence is taken from the gas chamber in crematorium V and includes views of the incineration pits (see images 1-4 on image sheet). The sequence taken from the trees at Birkenau presents a 'convoy' of undressed women. These images, of which only the negatives remain, are black and white, and unfocused; a description can be found in a letter discovered with the negatives, written by David Szmulewski. No one has identified Alex, the man who took the photographs, and therefore all we know of the event captured in these four photographs, is here.

Prior to the publication of the interview with Richter, I was drawn to Georges Didi-Huberman's book and spent time considering the author's method for thinking through the process of writing about the images. The book presents a persistent critical

thinking around four small negative prints, in an attempt to negotiate the meaning of the image in light of historical evidence (and the lack of it). The author approaches the photographs, re-evaluating a universal reaction to the found physical object-hood of the images and the possibility of ascertaining meaningful content. Through this process the author contradicts an assumption that the image may act as a mere documentation of the event of the Holocaust.

Didi-Huberman attends to readings on the absences that remain, on the idea of the 'trace' in relation to theory, and on language and memory as key themes, while reflecting on the event of the Holocaust as something represented by documents: visual and textual, that we know of today. His essay pulls together a vast array of historical information, writings by survivors, testimonies discovered in the camps, and details from archives. At the same time, running throughout the essay is a constant stream of thinking about the encounter with these images and how one might approach them in an ethical way.

Didi-Huberman explains that these images are capable of disrupting and therefore, reconfiguring, the assumed relationship of images and the historian's area of study. The manner in which we approach the photographs to test whether they are *useful* or not, is informed by contemporary judgement. But by attempting to remove the theoretical from the constructed experience of these images, one is able to find something *other* in the images contained within the photograph. Didi-Huberman explains that these photographs contain a "troubling singularity", for they can help to dispute the "theoretical symptom", which we can imagine is the formal study of archival material. They also shake our common history,³⁹ which can result in one supposing to have gained from the image before encountering it, before seeing.⁴⁰

³⁹ Ibid., 57.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 157. Jacques Rancière is quoted here: "[There is an] inflationist usage of the notion of the unrepresentable and of an entire series of notions to which it is willfully

By isolating ideas and opinions, he attempts to consider the problem of looking, considering the images beyond the confined position of historical documents. This remains an approach that is interesting to my own thinking when considering the separation between theory and the work of art, for it is important to stress that these photographs are not works of art, hence their capacity to close down attempts of interpretation beyond the means available. There is only so much that can be found in the images, which, on an ethical level, at first restricts interpretation beyond what is visually available. However, by considering the meaning of terms such as the *unimaginable* and *unrepresentable*, the author opens up an approach to the images that speaks of how we *think the image*⁴¹ as opposed to closing down our thought processes when looking. By thinking about Didi-Huberman's writing practice next to Richter's art practice, I can consider the potential of an engagement with the image and identify my own experience of the artist's practice.

Gesture of the artist/the writer

Our engagement with the visual world is informed by the linguistic language that we relate back to daily experiences, for, from the Derridian perspective, there can be nothing outside of language. Whether the experience of an event is documented or not, whether by film or a written testimony, the experience always returns us back to the use of language. And while memory – whether lived or not – can relate back to a personal experience, the past is always informed by the specific and universal. So there can never be one version of an event, not for us personally, or for a society as a

connected:... This inflationist usage in effect makes all kinds of phenomena, processes, and notions fall under one same concept and encircles them within the same aura of sacred terror. From the Mosaic interdiction of representation of the Shoah, through the Kantian sublime, the Freudian primal scene, Duchamp's Grand Verre, or Malevich's White Square on White.”

⁴¹ Ibid., 158.

whole. Ultimately, when we experience an artwork, our engagement is the same as when we are reading the writing of others, for we come to it with lived and remembered experiences.

Didi-Huberman spends time considering prints, which are the result of 'Alex' attempting to make something evident with the use of his camera; to show evidence that could be recognised by the viewer. These visual fragments are the result of time captured: they represent the "photographic act," remaining "metaphorically, out of breath."⁴² It can be found in the blur of the image, the lack of pictorial construction, the framing. It is the abstraction in the image that renders the image filmic, but also impossible to pin down as any concrete evidence of the event.

Didi-Huberman consistently returns to the notion of montage as a way of engaging with the images. Whereas we might consider the montage to be a gathering of disparate images to create a new perspective, Didi-Huberman writes of the image itself as being a montage. For him there is always a doubling occurring in the experience of looking, for the image is never just one thing. He writes of fact and fetish, of appearance found. Didi-Huberman writes: "the image is neither *nothing*, nor all, nor is it *one* – it is not even *two*. It is deployed according to the minimum complexity supposed by *two points of view that confront each other under the gaze of a third*."⁴³ Thus the image is always dialectical, still relating back and forth to an ethical stance. As Simon Sheikh explains, Didi-Huberman "locates ethics in the ability to circulate and compare, in the way that an image can never stand alone."⁴⁴ When Didi-Huberman speaks of the process of taking information from the photograph, the moment of confronting the image and adjusting the eyes to gain a sense of what is

⁴² Ibid., 37.

⁴³ Ibid., 151.

⁴⁴ Simon Sheikh, "Circulation and Withdrawal, Part I: Circulation," *E-Flux*, 2015, <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/circulation-and-withdrawal-part-i-circulation/>. [Accessed 16th August 2016]

being presented, he is writing of the gesture of looking and writing: of putting what he sees into language.

Gerhard Richter's oeuvre is far reaching in subject matter and object-hood, his work always approaches and tests the potentiality of paint as a medium, often with reference to historical and social events specific to his experience, as well as addressing more universal subject matter. The artist deals with universally recognisable moments in history, approaching his subject matter from a specific perspective. Without providing any clear form of intellectual or emotional response, he therefore, implicates his viewer. Questions concerning the reasons behind the artist's choice of subject matter relate to discussions on the conceptual elements that make up the artwork. In an interview in 1966, Richter says, "To talk about painting is not only difficult but perhaps pointless, too That includes the typical question: 'What were you thinking of?' You can't think of anything; painting is another form of thinking."⁴⁵ This statement allows the artist to remove himself from analysis of the painting. By closing down the use of words in response to his practice, he hints at the failure of interpretation. And yet, he continues: "What interests me in general, and this also applies to painting, are things I don't understand. It's like that with every picture: I don't like the ones I understand."⁴⁶ Our encounter with Richter's practice is often informed with a knowing related to the titles, but also to what is known of the artist's oeuvre and the visual signposts he sets out: one looks with the expectant gaze. Our sight might also be, in part at least, that of the critics: when one approaches the artwork, the act of looking is submitting knowledge found elsewhere, thus altering the ability to *see*. This moment of looking is always after the event, which relates to the experience of Richter's practice.

⁴⁵ Corinna Belz, *Gerhard Richter Painting*, 97 mins (Soda Pictures Ltd, 2011), DVD

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

Richter often takes found photographs and uses the medium of paint to *recreate* the image, thus he aligns the photograph, which acts as a recognised visual reminder of the event, with his own specific engagement with the image. The experience of looking at Richter's paintings shifts when it is representative of photographs taken from his family album. However, through the techniques used, the images he creates always contain an aspect of absence, whether it is through the blurring of the paint, or by the literal turning away of his subject as in the case of his family portraits. It is as if his work is imbued with a recognition of the absences that return us back to our imagination. Thus the experience of his work creates a scenario for the viewer where one's specific engagement is somewhat conflicted. The personal is activated as soon as one attempts to think about the image being presented. The artist, like the writer, is engaged with a practice that reflects on the activity of the imagination in response to the act of looking.

Looking at Richter's paintings, one negotiates what is visually available as with the found photographs Didi-Huberman discusses, through the intellectual negotiation of the gaze. In the former's work, one can recognise the montage within the one painted image and the artist's gesture thinking-as-making, in the same way that the writer thinks through his activity of writing.

Thinking the image: dialectics of the image

One can look at a number of writers who have grappled with the idea of what it means to render meaning through the visual representation as found in an image.

Didi-Huberman quotes Jean Paul Sartre, who writes: "the whole problem is born of the fact that we have come to the image with the idea of synthesis [...]. The image is an

act and not a thing.”⁴⁷ Sartre claims that the image presents the activity of *showing* rather than being able to stand in for the object or subject of the image. When describing the term *image*, Sartre explains that the expression ‘mental image’ creates confusion, although it is this he is describing when speaking of the image as a “relation.”⁴⁸ He believes that the image is not a consciousness of an image, but of the object it stands in for. This image is made up of moments of thought (“knowledge conscious of itself, which places itself at once in the centre of the object”) and perception (“a synthetic unity of a multiplicity of appearances.”). He explains that the object of the image is not an image, for the word ‘image’ “could only indicate [...] the relation of consciousness to the object.” The image, then, is created when consciousness presents to itself an object.⁴⁹ Didi-Huberman relates Sartre’s ideas with reference to the image found in the photographic artefact in order to think more about what the image stands in for, beyond its object-hood. He attempts to show us as how we might attempt to describe what we find in the photographic image in terms of our personal consciousness in response to thought and perception.

When Walter Benjamin writes on the notion of *Nachleben*: “(living on, living after, surviving, afterlife, or following),”⁵⁰ the imagination is activated at the point when one looks upon the previously unseen. In this moment the gaze engages afresh with something that has been seen before. When looking upon the photograph, the after clashes with the present, thus creating a very real consciousness of our temporal condition. What Didi-Huberman does is consider the gesture of making the photographic image, of placing us consciously in Alex’s position as he attempts to

⁴⁷ Jean-Paul Sartre, *The Imaginary: A Phenomenological Psychology of the Imagination*, 1 edition (New York, NY: Routledge, 2010), 8–9. Quotation taken from *Images*.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ Gerhard Richter, *Afterness: Figures of Following in Modern Thought and Aesthetics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 2.

take the photographs. So the photograph becomes multi-layered with the conceptual and visually evident elements that make up the image. When we look at the rescued photographs we have the artefact in front of us, but also the mental image of Alex's activity.

Roland Barthes recognised that photography relates to the act of mourning, as discussed in *Camera Lucida*. The photographer's intention is to capture a visual memory to prevent it from becoming lost in time. In this instance, the parts of the image create signs that point towards the event. For example, a photograph creates the anecdote, creating and reinforcing parts of the memory that relate back to one's own specific history. The photograph is the object of remembrance, enabling thoughts to be gathered in order to prevent the emotional, imaginative loss that stands apart from the actual loss. The image becomes dialectical in that we react to it through an engagement with an imagination based on thoughts that are revealed through words. Barthes explains in the discussion of an image of his mother that he refuses to present in the book, that the photograph is only representative of the emotional and intellectual investment one has in it.⁵¹

Furthermore, when discussing the activity of writing, Barthes writes that "Literature is like phosphorous...it shines within its maximum brilliance at the moment when it attempts to die."⁵² We can think of this in terms of the effect of looking at the photograph when trying to find the absent presence after the event. In literary terms,

⁵¹ Brian Dillon, "Rereading: Camera Lucida by Roland Barthes," *The Guardian*, March 26, 2011, sec. Books, <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2011/mar/26/roland-barthes-camera-lucida-rereading>. As the author quotes on the picture of Barthes' mother: "It exists only for me. For you, it would be nothing but an indifferent picture." [Accessed 12th May 2014].

⁵² Susan Sontag, "Writing Itself: On Roland Barthes", Roland Barthes and Susan Sontag, *A Barthes Reader* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1983), viii. Quoting Barthes in "Writing Degree Zero", 1953.

one returns to a text as if returning to look at a photograph, for we bring new experience, informing the previous reading with new ideas and responses. Writing can take place after the event, when the mind attempts to rearticulate the experience through the use of language in writing. When writing about artworks then, I turn back towards theory, in light of the present image before me. Therefore, whether we write in the presence of the artwork (or after we set our gaze on it) when writing, one is not only looking – description is in part realised when the artwork is absent from the gaze. The description of an artwork is the result of a dialogue of theoretical and intellectual perspectives. Georges Didi-Huberman suggests that the dialogue is the moment of contradiction, the negation of one by the other. Like the signs in language, the photographic image is able to produce an effect along with its negation.⁵³ By describing the images found in these prints in terms of *tear-image*, *montage-image*, *lacuna-image*, Didi-Huberman is able to suggest a system of duality that he describes as a “dialectical plasticity” found in the photographs. The “dual system of their working”, is the “visible and visual, detail and ‘patch’, resemblance and difference, anthropomorphism and abstraction, form and formlessness, comeliness and cruelty, and so on.”⁵⁴ Thus the dialectical is the moment when the visual and the non-visual compete for identification, to bring to the surface other moments of realisation that become part of the other. The moments of the *unimaginable* and *unrepresentable* are the moments of the dialectic, for the complexity of these notions makes interpretation disputable.

Didi-Huberman discusses the spoken testimony in a way that sees language being selected and edited to create a constructive narrative, like the cropping of the photographs. In this scenario there is a doubling and splitting that links the linguistic approach in speech to the act of looking. The split is the conversation between past

⁵³ Didi-Huberman, *Images in Spite of All*, 80.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 79–80.

and present, while the idea of talking and being heard continues throughout Didi-Huberman's reading of Lanzmann's approach to filmmaking.⁵⁵ For Didi-Huberman, this is when a purity of narrative and the visual remains are abolished to create a 'purer' testimony⁵⁶. The testimonial speech that is often turned into writing is torn, as the image might be. And it is this testimony that turns into another image created that is as much fragmented and fraught with absences, "Where 'all words stop and all categories fail.'"⁵⁷

On Art History

When looking at Richter's paintings, the parts that remind us of the sourced media photographs relate the artwork to a past moment in time, to a universally recognised image from the past. The artist's choice of colours and the manner in which he applies the paint provide an opportunity to think about the artist's practice in relation to his specific intellectual and emotional reaction to the original image.

Art History has traditionally been concerned with writing about the ideas that are manifested through an engagement with an art object. It is concerned with ideas that can relate to, or stem from, a consideration of biographical information associated with the artist. As is the case with Richter, the viewer has to return to commentary relating to public events prior to and also around the time the work was produced. Therefore, when engaging with an artwork, we might imagine a multitude of narratives that create

⁵⁵ Ibid., 105. That being the *telling* compounded by the difficulty of being heard.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 103–104. He continues: 'We disdain the remains themselves, those vestiges in which the flaw is both pronounced (since the vestige presupposes, even signifies, destruction) and contradicted (since the vestige resists, survives, destruction).' See author's footnote 60 on Lyotard's theory of the impossibility of a fair exchange.

⁵⁷ Didi-Huberman, *Images in Spite of All: Four Photographs from Auschwitz*, Reprint edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 80–81. See also 69: "One can understand the absurdity of an argument that attempts to throw away all words or all images under the pretext that they are not all, that they do not say (Wajcman) 'all of the truth'."

a description. It is understandable then, that we imagine discovering a trace of the artist's emotional and intellectual response through the activity of their making. This becomes more interesting given that, as Josh Cohen tells us, "the real substance of your psychic landscape lies in the forgotten, the unnoticed, the barely registered details."⁵⁸ When thinking about earlier creative movements, there are numerous examples of instances when art attracted psychoanalytical thought. Surrealism, for example, gave way to an alternative visual language, something that even the artist him or herself might not be conscious of.⁵⁹ However, it remains that we cannot expect the art object to provide a clear line between a work of art and the thinking of the artist. Cohen has said that the phrase, "I remember nothing and yet this nothing is bothering me, I can't help feeling this nothing is really what matters,"⁶⁰ provides a summary of the logic of psychoanalysis, but it also identifies absences that remain when attempting to consider how the other person is thinking, whatever the activity they apply themselves to. This provides a method to consider our own engagement with the artwork, for instead of attempting to understand the artist more deeply, we can attempt to engage with our own responses, and consider the ways in which we are intellectually and emotionally affected by understanding our own specific experiences and engagement with universal memory. By thinking of the artist's activity of making-as-thinking, we also allow ourselves to consider conceptual elements beyond

⁵⁸ Josh Cohen, *The Private Life: Why We Remain in the Dark*, 1st Edition (London: Granta, 2013), 20.

⁵⁹ Marion Milner, "Dialogues between Art and Psychoanalysis," in *Between Art Practice and Psychoanalysis Mid-Twentieth Century: Anton Ehrenzweig in Context*, (Surrey: Ashgate Publishing Ltd, 2015), 41. Milner writes that from 1948 onwards, Ehrenzweig published his ideas in psychoanalytical journals and art periodicals and books, first publishing *Unconscious Form-Creation in Art*, as a four-part article in the *British Journal of Medical Psychology* in 1948 and 1949. Another article titled "The Origin of the Scientific and the Heroic Urge" appeared in 1949 in the *International Journal of Psychoanalysis*.

⁶⁰ Cohen, *The Private Life: Why We Remain in the Dark*, 154.

the surface image that relates back to the artwork. Considering other aspects of our lives and experiences away from the life of the artist creates a new methodology for our own engagement with art practice and gives the artwork new potential beyond our immediate response.

The art object acts very differently to the formal documentation of past events. Whether it appears to be engaging with social, cultural or political experiences or not, it is difficult to separate it from these details. While formal documentation is expected to provide information of some form, the artwork is always, in part at least, removed from this expectation. While we can think in terms of Didi-Huberman's approach in *Images in Spite of All*, to *think* the image⁶¹, by approaching the artwork as a montage as he does when looking at the rescued photographs, something more goes on in the experience of art. We can think about the activity of writing about an artwork as returning the gaze back to an idea, or identification with the notion of the visual. I would argue that Richter's paintings can be interpreted in this way, which is one key aspect that separates his artworks from the artefact. Art history informs our experience, but the artwork provides a potential for new experience by our acceptance of the absences in the work, by virtue of our not knowing the mind of the artist.

So if writing takes place after the event, there is thus a constant negotiation with the present and past in the moment of thinking through writing. Looking upon the image creates a similar experience when our eyes relate to the imagination, to create a dialogue with previous experience to negotiate the present moment of seeing. Writing about art provides a sense of separation, a going to and moving away from the work in order to interpret, in order to *think* the work. The condition of looking at an artwork is often the returning back to theory in light of the present image before us. This

⁶¹ Rather than use "about", Didi-Huberman says to "think the image," a turn of phrase I use throughout this chapter in order to emphasise the meaning.

approach has a double-rhythm in that one writes when one looks away, and description is therefore partly realised when the image is absent from the gaze.

We cannot underestimate the relationship between the artwork and the way that we articulate the experience through our own use of language, for this is how we create a memory and our own interpretation. While some contemporary theorists have critiqued certain “linguistic turns that dominated the humanities,” arguing that art itself has an ‘affecting’ capacity that can escape language,⁶² I believe that there is a method for bringing traditional forms of writing about art together with alternative literary models to experience the artwork. By accepting that once we actively engage in aspects of the visual world, we are already basing experience on language, it should be an intellectually and emotionally viable method to consider the textual and visual world together, beyond the conventions of literary and art historical theory.

For example, much of Hélène Cixous’ writing crosses the threshold of fiction and theory as well as autobiography, thus it is personal and unspecific at the same time. The parts that make up the writing cannot easily be summed up or placed together in a unified form. For Cixous, the conceptual element and writing processes are informed by experience, daily and culturally, historically and emotionally. Time is transient, and for each of us, specific moments remain in our conscious and inform our behaviour.⁶³ Taking this into consideration and thinking in terms of the artwork, one can imagine that the object might be considered as the result of a construction, of thought and of materials.

⁶² Andrews, Jorella and O’Sullivan, Simon, FACULTI - *Visual Cultures As... Objects and Affects*’ by Jorella Andrews and Simon O’Sullivan, podcast audio visual, 17th February 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IXMZxI_uYN0. [Accessed 20/08/2016]

⁶³ Hélène Cixous, “The Book as One of Its Own Characters,” *New Literary History*, The Book as Character, Composition, Criticism and Creation, 33, no. 3 (Summer 2002): 403–34.

The archive and writing about images: Writing in the imagination

What stands out from my reading of *Images in Spite of All* is the emphasis placed on these photographs with reference to how we engage with them as contemporary viewers. Didi-Huberman refers to one of the photographs in particular (see image 4), that has been described as “without use.”⁶⁴ This is pertinent if we are to consider the writer’s approach to these images when looking at Richter’s practice. Didi-Huberman considers what it is for a photograph – and indeed the artefact – to be useful, offering an approach that takes into account a more phenomenological mode of thinking about the image found. This image, he writes, is “... pure ‘utterance,’ pure gesture.”⁶⁵ Therefore the writer activates an engagement with the image through a use of the linguistical (to *utter*) and the physical (*gesture*) that refuse our possession of it, as both actions are fleeting, and in motion.

The archivist’s job is to link one piece of evidence to another, thereby forming history as a continuous narrative under construction. While the image we find in the photograph might contain details we seek when looking, by cropping and editing it in order to purify it of “the imaging substance of its nondocumentary weight,” it becomes a still artefact. And so, while the non-documentary is the un-useful, that being the moment when Alex fails to present us with the narrative we are looking for, the image remains a “visual event.”⁶⁶ And while the photographs remain for our contemporary gaze, for Didi-Huberman this takes place in the non-place of articulation: it is the absence of *useful* information that makes the image powerful.

The rescued photographs contain a movement of narrative, for the hazy shadows and blurred lines are barely recognisable. The moments of recognition have only fragments

⁶⁴ Didi-Huberman, *Images in Spite of All*, 36. See author’s reference to Jean-Claude Pressac, *Auschwitz: Technique and Operation of the Gas Chambers* (Beate Klarsfeld Foundation, n.d.1989), 36.

⁶⁵ *Ibid*, 36–38.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 36.

of narrative, and forever in motion, these images resist our desire for conclusive interpretation. These photographs are moments captured from history and while they continue to be read alongside the on-going development of the archive, they remain independent of this as still images activated through our engagement with them.

Didi-Huberman often refers to Jean-Luc Godard's filmmaking ability in order to remind us that cinema should be a *form that thinks*.⁶⁷ If Didi-Huberman's position on the use of montage in cinema is considered beside Richter's paintings, one recognises that experience is based on the moment when the imagination constructs the dialectic between what is being perceived and what is already known. To consider the *utterance* then, one must suspend the point of contemplation in order to restore the moment being imagined.

The *gesture* of taking a photograph is where the real – that being the indexical real – appears to the viewer. By describing the 'gesture' of taking the photograph as "utterance", one is reminded that the moment the indexical real appears is when the image relates back to language. In order to perceive and put the image into context, one grounds the experience through a use of language, giving it meaning.⁶⁸

Jacques Rancière claims that the visual and textual are conceived together, hence they are interlaced with one another as "signs among us."⁶⁹ Turning this directly to the act of looking and the visual, this linguistic approach plays a role in splitting the notion of image and of logic as outlined by Didi-Huberman in his essays on art history

⁶⁷ Ibid, 138. See author's reference to Jean-Luc Godard, *Jean-Luc Godard - Histoire(s) Du Cinema* (Artificial Eye, 2008).

⁶⁸ Ibid., 79–80: "It was a question not of hypostasizing a new definition of images taken as a whole but rather of observing their dialectical plasticity, which I have called the dual system of their working: visible and visual, detail and 'patch', resemblance and difference, anthropomorphism and abstraction, form and formlessness, comeliness and cruelty, and so on."

⁶⁹ Jacques Rancière, *The Future of the Image*, Reprint edition (London ; New York: Verso Books, 2009), 35.

discourse.⁷⁰ Image and language become intertwined, un-differential even, in our attempt to *find* or *define* the Holocaust, and in the case of thinking the Holocaust as an ‘event’, both are ultimately inadequate. Didi-Huberman makes the claim that “Auschwitz is only imaginable”, for our knowing is always restricted to the image and therefore we are left with the internal consideration of what is present and what is absent, “this lacunary necessity.”⁷¹ The moment of realising this inadequacy is the moment one contemplates the event, therefore thinking the image and placing it into language.

Unimaginable/unrepresentable

The *unimaginable* and *unrepresentable* moments of the Holocaust remain alongside the discussions that continue in relation to documents left behind. There is no disputing the fact that associated images do exist, as well as written evidence and testimonies. And yet there are absences, the spaces in-between that remain without subjectivity, without image; photographic images as discussed by Didi-Huberman have been made to act as evidence but still leave gaps of knowledge within them. One can argue, however, that all singular objects remain with absences, for they act for and despite of the knowledge we already have and come to view them with.

Psychologist Gerard Wajcman claims that Didi-Huberman’s writing activity sets out as an argument that acts as “the destruction of a taboo”, creating an “invitation to hallucinate.” Meanwhile, Élisabeth Pagnoux accuses the writer for having a “passion for constructing nothing’ at the risk of ‘confusing everything [...] in order to consolidate the void.” For her, these images remain *too real* and therefore intolerable

⁷⁰ Georges Didi-Huberman, *Confronting Images*, 141. “If we want to open the 'box of representation', then we must make a double split: split the simple notion of image, and split the simple notion of logic.”

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 45.

to even be looked upon and discussed.⁷²The idea of *hallucinating*, to *construct nothing*, suggests that Didi-Huberman attempts to create knowledge and understanding where there is none to gain. For what Wajcman and Pagnoux accuse Didi-Huberman of is an attempt to reconsider moments from the past that they believe, by definition of what we understand of the events of the Holocaust, to be irreproachable.

Gerard Wajcman claims that these images lie: for they do not represent the reality of the camps, specifically the extermination taking place in the gas chamber. For Wajcman, the gas chambers constitute a kind of aporia that problematizes the status of the image and jeopardizes any thinking about the image.⁷³ And while Didi-Huberman claims that “reality is never entirely soluble in the visible”, unable to be fixed structurally within the image, he seems to counter-argue his claim that the Holocaust remains *unrepresentable*.

In *Confronting Images: Questioning the End of a Certain History of Art*, Didi-Huberman writes about Fra Angelico’s representation of the Annunciation at San Marco in Florence (image 19). He discusses at length the white space left at the centre of the event and writes of an intensity, of a movable, suspended space, for as he claims, white “was neither a ‘colouring’ to be chosen arbitrarily to emphasize or, conversely, to neutralize the objects represented in this work.” Nor, as he claims was it a “fixed symbol within an iconography.” When writing of this white space, Didi-

⁷² Didi-Huberman, *Confronting Images*, 51-52 and 54. References to Gerard Wajcman, “De la Croyance photographique”, *Les Temps Modernes* 56, no.613 (2001): 47-83, and Élisabeth Pagnoux, “Reporter photographique à Auschwitz”, *ibid.* 84-108, .

⁷³ Didi-Huberman, *Images in Spite of All*, 51. quoting Gérard Wajcman, *L’objet du siècle* (Paris:Verdier, 1998), 89-90. . It is worth noting Sally Shafto’s point that, while photographer and survivor Capa refused to take photographs on his return to Bergen-Belsen in 1945, knowing that “every new picture of horror served only to diminish the total effect” (Robert Capa in *Slightly Out of Focus* ((2001)), for Alex, the choice to take the photographs was based on a different personal necessity. See Sally Shafto, “Just Images,” *Framework* 45, no. 2 (2004), <http://www.questia.com/read/1P3-1112415691>. [Accessed 10th May 2014].”

Huberman claims that Fra Angelico was attempting to “ ‘incarnate’ on his level something of the unrepresentable mystery onto which his whole faith was projected.” Here white does not pertain to a representational code. Instead it opens representation “in view of an image.” A symptom, he writes, of the mystery.⁷⁴

In the discussion of the fresco, Didi-Huberman talks again of the *unrepresentable*. He writes about this in the respect of a certain mode of thinking where there is something beyond what can be perceived. And yet, when tracing the criticism received concerning his own approach to the rescued photographs (the archive images), he is shamed for attempting to think too much about what they claim, with his critics insisting that they remain out of reach for speculation. I would argue that, in the latter scenario, the writer presents an analysis of thinking through terminology, and working with that to establish where the unrepresentable begins and ends. The author is claiming that we are too quick to close down interpretation. When discussing Fra Angelico’s fresco, the absence of colour – the white space – is discussed at length, and this takes into account the work within the context of the cell, as well as the criticism from art historians that the artist was not the most accomplished and if anything, a little naïve in his execution. He also makes reference to how this has been taken to mean that the *visible* and *legible* were not important to the artist, for his concern was the “*invisible*, the ineffable.”⁷⁵ As with the discussion of the rescued photographs, the author writes of the ‘dialectic’, when the viewer’s gaze is on the fresco, for according to Didi-Huberman: “upon entry into the cell, (the work) simultaneously delivers the complex skein of a virtual memory: latent, efficacious.”⁷⁶ The author writes about an artwork in complex language that takes on historical accounts, art theory critique, and his own personal engagement with the fresco. Speaking of my own experience of the

⁷⁴ Didi-Huberman, *Confronting Images*, 24.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 15.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 19.

same fresco, I found the use of an electric light that lit the white space an interesting concept, for it was positioned to guide the viewer's gaze to this spot of the ineffable. At what point, we might ask, does the *real* experience take place, and at what point can a photographed image represent the *real* of any subject, whether painting or not? Didi-Huberman's analysis of the rescued images allows one to attempt an answer. To my mind, it is when the imagination takes the photograph and then reconstructs an image of an event in one's own mind. But again, this *real*, if that is what we can claim it to be, remains subjective and time-specific, based on my experiences and memories at the point of encounter.

When engaging with the rescued photographs, Didi-Huberman's writing activity is concerned with images outside of art, but contains similar techniques of analysis. In addition, by bringing the criticism of others into the discussion, he is able to negotiate this use of language and our ability to think the image and consider its parts in relation to our own experiences. How indeed can the image be described as a "lie" or rather, what constitutes the lie in a document? For Alex, this image could not possibly lie for his attempt to take it asserts to a need to tell a truth. This truth is where the image is placed into the imagination, where we as contemporary viewers begin to employ our use of language to confront our own engagement with the image, even if the real is independently subjective to us.

As a pre-condition for looking, there can be an awareness of what is not available in the moment of perception, depending on the context one finds oneself in. Furthermore, we routinely train ourselves to edit out such awareness. Therefore one is always thinking through the activity of looking at the image. To look at these images requires a moment of contemplation, for it is difficult to know what one is looking at in the moment of perception. The figures are faded and barely visible, and it is our understanding before looking at these photographs that helps place together the fragments of recognisable imagery to find content. Indeed, it is the connection to the

event that one assumes to know, that make these pictures appear to contain forms of evidence for what is deemed as *unimaginable*. But these images push us to imagine and our gaze is thus concentrated in order to claim the image before us, or else it is distracted by what has been left out. There is a “double-rhythm”⁷⁷ of the gaze, at once seeing, while in part looking somewhere that remains in our imagination.

When engaging with the rescued images therefore, the imagination acts ceaselessly while images and ideas collide and fuse, acting on the personal activity of knowledge and thought.⁷⁸ Didi-Huberman pushes his reader to question the stance of thinking the past as *unimaginable* through writing and by *thinking the image*.

Didi-Huberman places his attention on a very small part of ‘evidence’ surrounding the Holocaust; he looks at each photograph as one of four parts, two sequences presenting two shots of the same moment of extermination. By describing the images on these prints in terms of *tear-image*, *montage-image*, *lacuna-image*, he approaches them as “readable”, and is able to consider their potential to provide knowledge by setting them in motion, by making them resonate with, and to show how they differ from, other source material. By doing so, he justifies his assertion that knowledge cannot be gained from one image alone, “any more than imagination might consist in passively enfolding oneself in a single image.”

We might therefore say that the image is like the imagination, for it is multifaceted, always changing as we ourselves gain new experiences. When relating the image to the imagination, Didi-Huberman claims “it is a question of putting the multiple in motion, isolating nothing, showing the hiatuses and the analogies, the indeterminations and the overdeterminations.”⁷⁹ One might continue this assertion to say that our

⁷⁷ Didi-Huberman, *Images in Spite of All*, 41.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 112–113: “An image without imagination is quite simply an image that one didn't spend the time to work on... To know, one must therefore imagine for oneself: the speculative work table does not go without an imaginative montage table.”

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 120.

relation to the image through our use of language changes as we gain new experience, thus the visual is a wholly visceral and intellectual experience as we think through the image. Thus, the linguistic body is always part of the encounter.

The notion of the *unimaginable* and *unrepresentable* provides a way of justifying the notion of the *unsayable* through writing or speech. Didi-Huberman's critics accuse him of writing when he should be leaving the evidence alone, but it is the link between the image and the conceptual idea of what the image stands in for that provides an opportunity for a contemporary and necessary engagement. And it is here that I can identify how we can bring in the discussion of the art object with reference to the historical event. For I would argue that much of Richter's work is an attempt to represent or to deal with the unsayable, the unspoken or the unwritten, by creating artworks that challenge a notion of what is visually present and absent.

One sentence, one picture, one piece of film, or an extract of news, can change the moment surrounding our perception of an event indefinitely, but at any point this can become futile, irrelevant next to another moment, creating a sense that once we had knowledge, and then realising that we had yet to gain it. The imagination, as Didi-Huberman states, "is not a withdrawal to the mirages of a single reflection...it is instead a construction and a montage of various forms placed in correspondence with one another."⁸⁰ By placing two things side by side, the montage differentiates the similar from semblance and for Didi-Huberman, montage is situated at the level of thought. This is the moment of the dialectic, which I believe can be related to and be tested against the visual and non-visual moments in Richter's painting practice.

Seeing and non-seeing

⁸⁰ Ibid., 120, See Hannah Arendt, "Foreword", in Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, New Ed edition (London: Pimlico, 1999). Benjamin's archive project is an attempt to 'capture the portrait of history in the most insignificant representations of reality, its scraps, as it were,' and influenced by surrealism (Brief II, 685).

Didi-Huberman's essay is made up of a series of ideas to negotiate our proximity to the event in a discussion around the found image and what is visually available and what is absent. By doing so, he draws the reader into a discussion where the potential of the gaze and the potential of the artefact become more complex than one might at first expect. While claiming that we live in a continuous condition of knowing through represented images and other forms of information that circulate the visual world, he argues that the gaze and our knowledge constitute the 'pre-found' before the encounter with the object in question.

Didi-Huberman writes about the four images as an autonomous object, waiting for the viewer to imply a use-value to it. In the case where the image is found to be *without use*, and therefore, "relegating them (the images) to the sphere of the simulacrum," the object is excluded from the historical field. In this case, we start to ask too little of the image, severing the phenomenological potential from its very substance.

The lack of *evidence*, resulting in a reduction of importance, might have another outcome. For our knowledge of the camps and the events that took place is made up of fragments of evidence, of testimony. This unbearable knowledge means that the historicism associated with these events can manufacture its own *unimaginable*.⁸¹ This closes the event off from our relationship with the event. However, if we are to take these small fragments of evidence – of memory even – we are able to reactivate an engagement. So for instance, on looking, there is a 'flash' of recognition of the self in relation to Alex as he takes the photograph. There is a point at which Alex's gesture immediately affects our gaze, and our inability to place it alongside what we now know of the event means that these photographs reject conciliation, while remaining always necessary as evidence.

⁸¹ See author's citation: V.Klemperer, "LTI, la langue du IIIe Reich. Carnets d'un philologue" (1947).

In conversation with Nicolas Serota, Richter speaks of having to look closer at the images to realise that people are moving corpses; that the contrast between the look and content of the photographs is “appalling”. Perhaps it is the reality that one imagines when looking that makes it seem appalling – that the people, as he says, move like “gardeners” – a common, easy-going activity, rather than the horrific activity that is, in fact, taking place. This *reality* that Alex presents is shocking in how seemingly mundane and everyday the action is, and yet frozen in time, one is left with it to continue contemplating. It is this frozen state that Didi-Huberman deals with, and through which we are able to relate to Richter’s artistic practice.

To consider the position of the visual elements that make up the photograph, John Berger provides a method for thinking the image. He speaks of the image as a “sight detached from place and time,”⁸² selected from infinite possibilities. Thus the still photograph provides a narrative, for the aim of the photographer is to relay information as one might relay an anecdote. Furthermore, when looking we instinctively recognise the absence(s), for looking upon the photograph provides a moment in which one encounters the result of a pursuit to show. While the imagination comes into play to form a narrative based on what is present and what is absent, this is also a moment of recognising that the image perceived remains the subjective perception of an event.

Looking at the image and what the absence might represent through art history writing, one can turn again to Didi-Huberman in *Confronting Images*, where he attempts to consider what he terms the “history of a visual paradigm.”⁸³ In this case, the author questions what it means to *name*, thus placing the visual into language. So

⁸² John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: Penguin, 2008), 9.

⁸³ Didi-Huberman, *Confronting Images*, 30. He continues to explain that this involves a writing of the 'history of a phenomenology of gazes and touches, a phenomenology that is always singular, borne of course by a symbolic structure, but always interrupting or displacing its regularity.’’

when approaching the white, empty space found at the centre of Fra Angelico's fresco, Didi-Huberman's writing shifts so that the reader experiences the author's struggle with what is visually available to the viewer. He reflects on the art historian's motivation for naming the parts of the work of art in line with a learned historical narrative, but still, on experience the author claims that the fresco remains "more *event* than a painted object." In line with the point made earlier, the status of this *empty* white space is irrefutable because of its straightforward efficacy. It is also paradoxical because, as the author explains, it is *virtual*, presenting the "phenomenon of something that does not appear clearly and distinctly. It is not an articulated sign; it is not legible as such. It just offers itself: a pure 'appearance "of something"'⁸⁴. But the visible is conceived from a position of knowing how to name.⁸⁵ Didi-Huberman writes earlier when engaging his reader in questions on the experience of art:

Posing one's gaze to an art image, then, becomes a matter of knowing how to name everything that one sees – in fact, everything that one reads in the visible. There is here an implicit truth model that strangely superimposes the *adaequatio rei et intellectus* of classical metaphysics onto a myth – a positivist myth – of the omnitranslatability of images.⁸⁶

There is a "rhetoric of certainty" that the author considers by thinking through the physical engagement with the work and by doing so, the author continues to return back to language, suggesting that it is inevitable that one engages the imagination to think the image and to think about the activity of making.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 17–18.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 30.

⁸⁶ Didi-Huberman, "Questions Posed", *Confronting Images*, 3.

Richter's art practice

Through an engagement with Didi-Huberman's writing on the artwork, one is able to engage with the writer's encounter with the physicality of the artwork in relation to what is visually available. The writer is engaging with a certain religiosity attached to the fresco, matched by his gesture of writing about the activity of seeing. From this we can turn to Richter's contemporary practice as an activity of thinking through making, which also invites the viewer to *think* their relationship to an event.

Gerhard Richter's practice turns the photographic image into subject, for the artist thinks the activity of looking through the process of painting from the photograph. In doing so, his paintings stage the moment of simultaneous vision and blindness, levelling our sight to the same, regardless of our re-learned knowing of our gaze and therefore regardless of the physical closeness to what we think we saw, and what we think to know. Richter seems impartial in his presentation of the forbidden and familiar imagery that he presents, contradicting our expectation through technique, and often presenting a shift between what we think we ought to see and what we might hope to recognise.

We live in an era where images are readily available to us, much more so than to the previous generation. In newsprint and social media platforms, the photograph often stands in for the event, seeming to overshadow the role of writing in description. Richter's practice draws one's attention to the medium of photography and the way it acts as a record, which also displaces the human presence of the photographer. Human sight is replaced with a method for recording, turning the subject matter into an object. But while the camera turns the moment into an object of memory, the stillness cannot defy the activity of thinking the image. By displacing elements of the found image through his painting practice, Richter unsettles the gaze at the moments it becomes active.

When considering the act of looking in the moment of perception, one can ask: at what point does visual engagement become a matter of the ocular as opposed to a reflection on an idea of pre-found knowledge? Dietmar Elger writes that Richter wants photographs that “transcend the time-bound, captured moment and avoid the anecdotal concreteness of a specific situation.”⁸⁷ For him, the blurring of details at the end of the painting process enhances the sense of timelessness in Richter’s painting. I would suggest that this sense of *timelessness* relates to the activity of looking and thinking in terms of the past, for the act of looking constantly repositions our engagement with the visual world around us.

The set of four photographs that Didi-Huberman discusses refuse a cumulative interpretation, not only because of the technical use of the camera, but also because of the information they refuse to convey to the contemporary viewer. One can recognise this activity in Richter’s paintings, whether the content is ‘recognisable’ as taken from an event, or in his more *abstract* works such as the Grey paintings. Richter can be described as a master of changing styles.⁸⁸ Whether the paintings presents familiar imagery – more obviously figurative – taken from private and found photographs, or the result of the artist’s experimentation with colour, tonality and mark-making, within both methods we see the shift between representation and absence as an activity of thinking through making.

When looking at Richter’s more figurative paintings, the distinguishing moment of craftsmanship and the activity of looking at the familiar are confounded by the recognition of the subject matter and therefore the acceptance of the absences within

⁸⁷ Dietmar Elger, *Gerhard Richter: A Life in Painting* (Chicago; London: The University of Chicago Press, 2009), 274.

⁸⁸ Corinna Belz, *Gerhard Richter Painting*, DVD (Soda Pictures Ltd, 2011). This reference quotes a journalist during a press conference (16th October 2008) during the exhibition titled "Gerhard Richter: Abstract Paintings", Museum Ludwig, Cologne, Germany, 18th October 2008-1st February 2009.

the image. Paintings containing publicly known imagery are often studies in technique that play on one's imagination, while the more photorealistic works taken from private family albums also contain this refusal. In both instances, the certainty of our gaze is displaced between recognition and the unfamiliar in our own lives, but also of something privately acted upon by the artist. As we attempt to determine where the recognisable and the unfamiliar begin and end, our gaze becomes that of the voyeur: insistent on finding something to determine interpretation.

This leads on to a consideration of why the *Grey* paintings are so provocative. The void of content is reminiscent of the techniques employed by Mark Rothko or Robert Ryman for example, but because of what we know about Richter's practice, there remains a possibility of a relationship to photographic imagery. Furthermore, the history and narratives we read surrounding these works, and indeed the fact that they are contemporary and not within the modernist tradition of the Rothko or the Ryman painting, makes us wonder about the activity of thinking that created these works.

When asked about the *Grey* paintings in 1976, Richter described them as "just a grey surface, painted grey."⁸⁹ He continues: "Perhaps my fondness for grey comes from photographs but now it has nothing to do with them. It's all about painting." The viewer can be reassured that behind the colour there is nothing to grasp as there might be when viewing a blurred photograph. The inability to gain information beyond the surface image can be reassuring in the way it closes down interpretation, but the non-object of the *Grey* paintings also acts as a refusal by the artist. There is the potential for these works to be activated through ideas of what they might represent beyond the visual elements found, but this ultimately takes the gaze away from the work itself. Thus we are placed between seeing and non-seeing, activating the artist's activity of thinking through making, alongside our own desire to interpret and to bring a visual experience back to the use of language.

⁸⁹ Ibid. At the artist's Atelier Düsseldorf in 1976.

Richter has said that he wanted to paint these monochrome grey works, to “fabricate pictures out of nothing.”⁹⁰ And yet, he explains that while you can describe a painting in detail, “the view” in the painting remains a composite of elements and so the image is again, like the montage.

Speaking more generally about his practice, Richter has said: “It’s not that I’m always thinking about how to make something timeless, it’s more of a desire to maintain a certain artistic quality that moves us that goes beyond what we are, and that is, in that sense, timeless.”⁹¹ This activity of shifting between representation and absence engages the viewer with Richter’s practice, so one might consider the meaning of putting paint to the canvas and what it means to engage with one style rather than another, to choose a colour over another. One is left unsure of how to engage with the thinking process that takes place as part of the artist’s practice. An attempt at interpretation leaves us shifting between one position and another. It is this double-rhythm of representation and refusal, of figuration and abstraction activated through the making, that gives his practice its contemporariness.

The process of viewing Richter’s painted images can conflict with our memory of an event; while the painting may speak of universal memories associated to the narrative, the reflection of the photograph in painted form reduces the content to mere representation. By doing so, the subject and information relate back specifically to our own experiences, thus our emotional as well as intellectual response. Furthermore, the use of paint, a seemingly traditional and visual artistic medium, has implications on the moment of perception for the tradition attached to the medium is conflicting with the experience of the subject matter. Both the narrative and the medium affect the

⁹⁰ Gerhard Richter, Nicholas Serota and Mark Godfrey, *Gerhard Richter: Panorama* (London: Tate Publishing, 2011), 19.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

moral imperative that becomes part of the experience of looking, as much as it might position the artist too, in response to the event.

Peter Osborne describes Richter's artworks as constructions of the event, and the image acts as a form of doubling. Therefore, the engagement with the painting is not unlike Didi-Huberman's approach in terms of the double-rhythm and the montage effect of the gaze. Here there is a moment of splitting, when the past and the present moment of looking collide and then split into a present that passes, and a past that is preserved: a "quasi observation", when the view is inverted.⁹²In both cases, one is asked to consider the phenomenological dimension of looking despite the stillness of the image.

When engaging with the images from Auschwitz, Georges Didi-Huberman asks the reader to approach them in a way that I would suggest asks the viewer to renegotiate their approach to the perception of the visual and non-visual; it alters the perception of what we think can be found within the image and what we imagine to know about the event from which the image derives. With the latter, what one thinks and what one imagines is never unified, for these images are not the result of an artistic act, but an attempt to reassemble evidence of the event, a piece of information, and a *truth*, of what was happening at a moment in time. Therefore, the photographer's activity is one of recording rather than presenting an idea. And ultimately, there are moments where we might assume he fails, for within this remains the inability to provide specific historical knowledge. However, as Didi-Huberman argues, our inability to place the photographs allows us to re-look and re-think the image. It is this mode of rethinking what we see that can be ascertained when considering the practice of Gerhard Richter, as well as thinking further about how we relate to conceptual aspects in relation to the visual in contemporary art practice.

⁹² Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 81.

The experience of an artwork is dependent on the engagement with an object (real and imagined). Thus, the experience involves a consideration of the material or non-material object of art in relation to subject-matter. The very materiality of Richter's paintings confronts our gaze with the uncertainty of where the space of the ocular rests, while the blur acts differently depending on which artwork is being spoken of. When approaching a work that can be identified as a moment held in a photographic image or a rendering of a historical painting, it forms an appearance of movement and a refusal of anything beyond its photographic object-hood. As I have said, for Didi-Huberman, the indexical relationship between image and reality is where the image touches the *real*. And while this might be related to the act of recognition in Richter's practice,⁹³ it remains that the artist presents a moment between thought and articulation, thus representing the moment between the artist's activity of thinking and the activity of making. In his action of thinking the image found through the activity of making, he creates a painting where the *real* becomes a personal response, activated through the experience of the viewer looking at the artwork.

Grey paintings/seeing and non-seeing

I want to consider the Grey paintings in light of Didi-Huberman's essay because of their seeming lack of discernible imagery. Richter produced numerous works titled *Grey* (see images 5-11) between 1966 and 1986, and while some appear discernible as abstract paintings, others almost glare back refusing to deny their sludgy, non-shade of a colour. For they create the image of a painting, but seem to lack content, creating a

⁹³ Peter Osborne, "Abstract Images: Sign, Image, and Aesthetic", in Benjamin H. D. Buchloh and Peter Osborne, *Gerhard Richter* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2009), 101. Osborne writes: "Not only does the physical connection between the object and image in the photographic process establish a relation of resemblance, but recognition of this relation (the iconic character of the image) is a condition of its interpretation as an index."

sense of an absence of image within the visual object. The paintings are studies in tonality of colour and experiments in mark-making, yet with a quality that is conclusive in form. Rachel Haidu describes one of the early small paintings⁹⁴ as conveying the “magnification of a photographic image as to seemingly transfer its utterly indiscernible subject to our perception.” In “seeing better” she explains, we also witness a process of disappearing.⁹⁵

It is clear why Haidu would choose to place these paintings within the photographic realm, if one is to consider these works alongside the later *October Cycle 1977, 1988* (Images 21-25), for instance. Rendered in grey and white tones, these paintings are reminiscent of the newspaper print where Richter found the images depicting members of the Red Army Faction group before and after their deaths, images of the cells and objects associated to their imprisonment. In a few instances, the Grey paintings take on an eerie affect as though taken from the shadow formed on Andreas Baader’s cell⁹⁶ (image 21).

While unyielding in its non-colour, grey is the shade of industrial landscapes with an association with the nostalgic images of cinema. This resonates with Haidu’s interpretation and Richter’s practice, and his ability to present the filmic in still images. However, one can also justify the artist’s claim that these works are about the activity of painting. These paintings present the colour grey varying between warm and cold, light and heavy, depending on the mix and application of paint. Therefore, one should consider the Grey paintings, these colour *moments*, as works of art within

⁹⁴ Gerhard Richter, *Grau (Grey)*, (194-14), oil on canvas, 1967. <http://www.gerhard-richter.com/art/search/detail.php?paintid=6051&artworkID1=paintings&number=+194-14&p=1&sp=32>. [Accessed 10th May 2014].

⁹⁵ Rachel Haidu, “Images of the World and the Inscription of History”, *Gerhard Richter*, 203.

⁹⁶ Andreas Baader was one of the first leaders of German left-wing militant organization, the Red Army Faction, commonly referred to as the Baader-Meinhof Gang. See Gerhard Richter, *Cell (670)*, 1988, Oil on canvas, 200 x 140 cm. (Image 21)

and of themselves rather than placing them into the representational realm of photography. In fact, one might consider how they function as single works despite the artist's biography and oeuvre.

The differing grey tones provide a sense of the artist's activity and the process involved in isolating the desired colour – a process that is not so dissimilar to finding the perfect words to describe in a sentence. In fact, when looking at these canvasses we are led to consider an idea of a colour as we might think of the word as they write. By choosing to return again and again to a grey canvas, Richter's practice becomes one where the craft collides with the idea of painting as a representation of an event. The process of mark-making, selection and depth of colour, next to the vividness of the representation, challenges our assumption of perception.

Not all of these works have titles, so one might accept these paintings as grey absences and at the most, shadows of what could be hidden or missing. What is striking when looking at the paintings under the title *Grau (Grey)* or *Ohne Titel (Untitled)*, is how the method for selecting the moments when the grey becomes darker or lighter and the paint is applied through a brushstroke or maybe finger movements, renders some as representative of a section from an image, and others as almost absences, despite there being the presence of colour. The image here could be taken from the photograph, but as one attempts to identify a form of sorts, one's consciousness relates to mental images, beyond the painting.

Looking upon the painted area of grey in the *Grey* paintings contrasts to the area of black, the shadow for example, found in photographic print. Didi-Huberman explains one of the images in particular (Image 4), that has a large area of black where there appears to be no recognisable form, is thought to be *without use*. For the greyish black shades in the photographic document might conceal; thus a blankness of colour hides something remaining beyond our gaze, as opposed to it being an area filled with colour lacking figuration, as we find in Richter's *Grey* paintings. But, if we are

attempting to name and recognise a subject in the paintings, then in both cases, the gaze is unable to be fulfilled. The desire to see is always refused and so the imagination is set into motion.

Despite our knowledge of Richter's practice and therefore an expectation to find more than a *blank* area of colour, there is a case for *trusting* the image. Perhaps the artist is playing a trick on us, presenting something that we would rather not look at? It may be representative of a photographic image, or the part of one seen before, but because of the play with light and shadow, perspective and proportion, an alternative narrative might unfold.

It is at this moment of viewing the work that the collective and personal experience is called into question, thus allowing for a critical engagement in the moment between the experience, the formal expectation, and the representation of the artwork. And so, while a photograph might appear to hold something that can be determined as *real*, Richter's paintings confront this notion of what is real in the photographic image by challenging our engagement with a painting practice. Richter thus identifies that events and associated narratives remain indeterminable by the image, whether it be a painted representation or a photograph.

Richter's practice and photography

In *Images in Spite of All*, Didi-Huberman considers a number of films that deal with the event of the Holocaust and the representations of genocide in cinema. Lanzmann's *Shoah* and Godard's *Histoire(s) du Cinéma* are given detailed attention, while works including G.W. Pabst's *Westfront 1918* and Alain Resnais's *Nuit et brouillard* are brought into the discussion.

Didi-Huberman's approach to these films has impacted on my interpretation of Gerhard Richter's painting. For example, when considering Didi-Huberman's discussion of *Nuit et brouillard*, one is able to re-evaluate the still image and how in

this film the slowness of the camera, drawn to almost a standstill, creates an uneasiness when viewing. He reflects on the film's ability to shock viewers by simply portraying images that seem to traverse empty fields devoid of specific subject matter.⁹⁷ Resnais attains a feeling of the present, providing a representation of what the 'camp' in Nazi Germany would have looked like.⁹⁸ Didi-Huberman claims that Resnais does not provide a promise to tell us anything, but one might argue that he does, if only by bringing the viewer's gaze to this landscape.⁹⁹ For he creates an expectation that sets the imagination in motion to *think* the image, and it is this expectation that we find in works by Richter.

Richter's paintings do not function as a photograph might; his application of the paint means that images are slowly developed into excerpts of moments. However, it is also our recognition of this pursuit that renders the painting filmic – the use of blurring, the motion of the artist's hand, means that they defy a stillness. Peter Osborne describes the image found in Richter's work as combining the "aesthetic, spatiotemporal concretion of an object of sight with the element of the abstraction inherent in ideas." As a visual presentation of a *reality*, it is at once "sensuous and particular, ideal and abstract."¹⁰⁰

One finds example of this filmic quality in Richter's *September* (2005). A work we can associate with historical evidence, it presents an idea of September 11th as represented through images and the media. As a contemporary viewer, with access to our own living memory and the Internet, when thinking of the moment the planes crashed into the World Trade Center, we can select the photographs to see and articles

⁹⁷ Didi-Huberman, *Images in Spite of All*, 131.

⁹⁸ See author's footnote 38 regarding terminology for the use of the word 'camp'.

⁹⁹ Didi-Huberman, *Images in Spite of All*, 131. "Resnais's film never presented to 'teach everything' about the camps and proposed no more than an access to the inaccessible:.."

¹⁰⁰ Buchloh and Osborne, *Gerhard Richter*, 99. See author's footnote 9.

to read in order to engage with our visual memory. *September* acts as the artist's personal reaction, for the painting acts as a culmination of images representing the moments leading up to the crash; and yet, this painting doesn't necessarily represent anything at all, just the visual idea in response to a title.

The rescued images from Auschwitz "bear witness to a disappearance while simultaneously resisting it."¹⁰¹ Continuing to relate the process of encounter with an ethical bent, Didi-Huberman writes of redemption as that found in Benjamin's 'flash', as described in his "Theses on the Concept of History." Furthermore, from his reading of Franz Rosenzweig¹⁰², Gershom Scholem¹⁰³ and Franz Kafka¹⁰⁴, redemption can be recognised as a moment of knowledge – the break, or a moment when a trace of something that might have been absent becomes present. Images become "the breath of air" and the 'echo' from the past, as might be found when watching a film and attempting to maintain the images that appear and disappear.¹⁰⁵ In the case of Richter, one might argue that in place of redemption we have recognition of the impossibility of seeing the event in its completeness, something not so far removed from the ethics of looking. We learn to react to the painting through associations with different forms of knowing, through the language we use to relate the image back to our own

¹⁰¹ Didi-Huberman, *Images in Spite of All*, 167.

¹⁰² Ibid., 168. See author's footnote to Franz Rosenzweig, *L'Etoile de la Rédemption* (1921), (Paris: Seuil, 2003). 286-295. Redemption is 'waiting for a disruption that can occur at any moment,' or a moment of resistance to the claws of history when they close in on us.' "

¹⁰³ Ibid., 168–169. See Author's footnote to Gershom Scholem, *Le messianisme juif : Essai sur la spiritualité du judaïsme* (1930)(Paris: Presses Pocket, 1992). 78-79. Redemption is 'destruction', 'subversion', 'a calamity.'

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 169. See author's footnote to Franz Kafka, *The Trial*, (1914) (London: Penguin Classics, 2000). 'Redemption' as apersistently 'negative utopia.'

¹⁰⁵ Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, New Ed edition (London: Pimlico, 1999), 247. 'The past can be seized only as an image that flashes up at the moment of its recognizability.... it is an irretrievable image of the past which threatens to disappear in any present that does not recognize itself as intended in that image.'

understanding gathered through image searches, as we might with the photographs from Auschwitz.

When Richter paints *September*, he produces movement as one might when rushing to take a photograph. The ‘blur’ in Richter’s work problematizes the claims of visual representation, for it resists reassurance in the gaze, while the layers of paint beyond the surface that reveal themselves render the still image with a filmic quality. The title activates our imagination of placing images to memory, and yet, this painting could be an abstraction, the colours forming a narrative based on the title of the piece as the artist adds and then scratches away the paint.¹⁰⁶

Osborne writes that by distancing the work from its photographic basis, Richter draws attention to the medium of paint, therefore “historicizing both its epistemological scepticism and painterly positivism, through their mutual relations, while insinuating a promise of becoming, ‘a bodying forth from the void.’”¹⁰⁷ Osborne claims this to be a “specific kind of post conceptual painting” that negates painting by photography and photography by painting. The photograph is the subject matter, while the painting submits to the mode of “objective representation,” negating the photographic image through painting technique and craft.

As is the case with *September*, Richter’s paintings of ‘images’¹⁰⁸ act as “historical indices of the relations between the image spheres of photography and painting.” Their intelligibility depends on our identification of a point from which they become legible to our contemporary gaze.¹⁰⁹ Through the medium used and the specifics of the artist’s practice, Richter’s work functions as a mode for reconsidering the photographic

¹⁰⁶ See, Robert Storr, *September: A History Painting by Gerhard Richter* (New York, NY: Tate Publishing, 2010). Storr provides a personal perspective on events with reference to Richter’s painting.

¹⁰⁷ Peter Osborne in, *Gerhard Richter* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2009), 96.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 99. See author’s footnote 8.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 110.

medium and the method by which one imagines the visual through the experience of the photograph. It shifts the reciprocal nature of the photograph to the painted image, by taking on an approach to the subject matter that affects the viewer's perception. Thus while reflecting on the image, he inverts the dialectical possibility of the representation.

Ultimately, the photographic image – not the photograph – becomes the object reflected upon, and in doing so one is able to think about the social function of the photograph and the representational forms.¹¹⁰ Didi-Huberman argues against relegating the rescued photographs to the “sphere of the *simulacrum*”, for as mere documents “we sever them from their specificity and substance, rendering the photographs as *documents* of horror, so that historicism manufactures its own unimaginable.”¹¹¹ One must allow the photographs to maintain a double-dimension, a double-rhythm that can be realized in the artistic act of negation that Osborne writes of with reference to Richter's practice.

What is pertinent to the discussion that Richter has with Serota about the rescued photographs is his claim that they are “just too spectacular” to reproduce in paint, suggesting an enormity despite their size. The *September* painting is the size of a computer screen, surprisingly small when first seen, but then again representative of how we first saw the events unfold. In the case of the small negative prints, it is because of their size that they create such impact – as Richter says, if he were to turn these photographs into much larger paintings it would be to their detriment.¹¹² Thus, as is the case with the *September* painting, it is the private and social narratives, the

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 95.

¹¹¹ Didi-Huberman, *Images in Spite of All*, 33.

¹¹² Having said this in 2009, the artist was to go on to produce artworks under the title *Birkenau* in 2014. It was revealed in 2016 that the artist began these paintings by sketching the image taken from the rescued photographs on canvas. These were then obliterated to produce four abstract paintings. For a closer reading on this, please see the Appendix.

emotional impact, the meaning associated with the fragments of evidence, and that which is beyond the image represented, that make the photographs affecting, and something of the *real*.

September lacks figural form despite remaining highly visual and representative of moments captured on film and on sound recordings. It is representative of the images that took over channels of information, and the relaying messages of catastrophe. Moments that could not be seen became present in our experience through testimonials reported, recordings of fear and devastation, and the imagined moments of telephone farewells. However, for many, the experience of this event remains abstracted through visual representation, as well as the culmination of imagined experience rather than direct engagement.

Robert Storr writes of his memory of being in New York, the sounds, smells and experience of being within the city. This and his recounting of stories told only emphasise the fact that our personal experiences form only part of the narratives that create historical events. Storr explains that Richter's picture "sucks the viewers into the vortex of the undoing of the image and thus into the destruction of the WTC." For this is what we are looking at: "the explosion of United Airlines Flight 175 from Boston as it slammed into the South Tower."¹¹³ This painting, although a modest, abstract painting, bears witness to the event, for it is the association of image and sound with testimony and written reports that creates an idea of the visual memory.

The painting maintains an essence of the familiar, representative of the event as a visual and linguistic condition in relation to the title. Despite its position on the "edge of being recognizable," as Storr points out, the "viewers must mentally reconstitute a likeness that is in effect disintegrating before their eyes."¹¹⁴ To take time to recognise a historical moment might seem at odds with the contemporary need for fast

¹¹³ Storr, *September*, 49.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 48–49.

information received and delivered through modern technology, but in doing so, one recognises how we engage with certain events and instances, weaving this into our daily lived and learned experience. In turn one might look at the photographs that Didi-Huberman speaks of as representative of evidence of the event, yet our removal is such that we are able to separate the experience of the photographer from the living moment of the event, as something removed from our own experience. Richter, by presenting his own activity of thinking the event through the painted surface, challenges our personal engagement with living memory as a method that might activate ways of engaging with the past.

When writing of Richter's practice, I am thinking in terms of the decision to create the painting and the process of making that is evidence in the surface of the work. Richter has taken the images of the planes crashing, adding paint to the canvas to then scrape away the surface to reveal layers of work, leaving an idea of the image that continues to resonate with the experiences documented by Robert Storr, but which also goes beyond this. It has the effect of being representative of the testimonies, photographs and videos, and yet resists being entirely representative of anything at all.

By thinking about the image in relation to the many ways in which we can articulate the experience – referring to literary references such as poetry or parts of a novel we have read, as well as the art critic's interpretation or the wall text in an exhibition – we are able bring a new use of language to the work and therefore activate it beyond the gallery setting. Furthermore, when thinking of a textualist reading, I am proposing that we think through the process of making in the same way that the author conducts research, writes and edits. Beyond this, we can consider the writer's activity and how we respond to his or her writing and that, by reading a text, our minds can be shifted, transported in time and place from our immediate surroundings. And if we allow it, art has the ability to do the same and *September* provides an example of this. In many ways the act of reading becomes a form of writing, for we make the content speak to

us at the point of reading. And I would argue that art has the potential to do this also, for our linguistical body is in the moment of encounter and therefore returns the image found to one's own experiences. I am not claiming that this provides the viewer with a particularly new method with which to experience Richter's artworks, but perhaps it can provide an alternative aspect or route to another dimension of thinking, taking us into a different moment of thought when experiencing and thinking the artworks after the encounter.

Richter's cycle October 18, 1977

When thinking in terms of the *unrepresentable*, one thinks of the visual moment of recognition. The visual representation can alter an overall perception conversely with the written description that remains in the imagination, thus informing how we look upon the visual. As an example, when considering fictional writing, representations of death are played out through the understanding that the description is standing in for the *real* event of death. A photograph of the dead, however, places that image into the imagination and activates our thinking selves in the narrative surrounding it. There can be no single authority on how to look and think the image for there is rarely one single perspective on the event. The image is a single perspective and so one is reminded that the photograph is merely "a piece of film limited by its own material."¹¹⁵

If one looks at and discusses art to gain some further understanding of the event being represented, one could claim that Richter presents the opposite, and his methodology for creating an image closes down the potential for this to take place. Instead of looking at the artwork and expecting a return of some unknown knowledge or opinion, one could look at the work by thinking about lived experiences and knowledge sourced elsewhere. Again, this is a more social engagement, one that can also bring in

¹¹⁵ Didi-Huberman, *Images in Spite of All*, 83.

the potential of engaging with different forms of writing that activate other narratives around the encounter.

Richter's cycle *October 18, 1977* (1988) in its entirety consists of fifteen painted copies of moments involving the Red Army Faction as found in Germany's national newspapers. Often presenting portraits of key members, critics have spoken of these paintings as glorifying the involved individuals.¹¹⁶ But what exactly is it about these images that are so objectionable, when in the first instance at least, it appears that Richter merely recreates found pictures in a painted form?

To answer this, we can return to the idea of an image containing a "comeliness and cruelty" quality, for these paintings, regardless of subject-matter, invite engagement. The painted surface allows the viewer to look closer at throw-away press cuttings that relate to the activity of the German terrorist group. And it is during the moment of this engagement that the artist's choice of technique creates another narrative upon that of the original. The immediate reason for feeling unsettled is the size of the works: the paintings, larger than any original photographs, are the size of a portrait that one might find in a national museum or religious building. *Confrontation 1-3*¹¹⁷ (images 22-24) is an example, representing three versions of Gudrun Ensslin in a chronological sequence of photographs after her arrest in the summer of 1972. Portrayed at human size, Ensslin is almost present in the room, confronting us with her smiling gaze.

The sourced images have been cropped, removing the lower part of the body, to render the subject almost life size; the picture format and unchanged painting technique place it within the series presenting narratives associated with the history of the Red Army

¹¹⁶ Robert Storr, *September: A History Painting by Gerhard Richter* (New York, NY: Tate Publishing, 2010), 37–43. Robert Storr's description of the reaction, namely an article by Eric Gibson in *The Wall Street Journal*, published 1st March 2002: the same year that "Gerhard Richter: Forty Years of Painting", opened at MoMA .

¹¹⁷ Gerhard Richter, *Gegenüberstellung 1-3(Confrontation 1-3)* (671-1,2,3), 1988, Oil on canvas, 112 cm x 102 cm.

Faction. In these three pictures, the blurring becomes less pronounced and the painting darker, towards the third image. The first picture has consistent shading as a colour study, creating softness in the subject, and thus tranquillity, while the blurred lines create a live-ness in motion. When Ensslin smiles back, one might even say there is an emotional content, a softness that is at odds with the knowledge that we bring to this picture.

The painting titled *Youth Portrait*, 1988¹¹⁸ (image 25) presents Ulrike Meinhof as a young active journalist prior to joining the Faction. Again the blurring gives the image a softness, rendering her more youthful than her 35 years. She has an uncompromising childish gaze that compromises our expectation, for her eyes have an awkward shyness and the slight smile and gentility are reminiscent of historical portraiture. Her hand rests gently on her arm, the whiteness of her skin contrasting with the darkness of her hair and sweater, while a light shines upon the subject, creating youthful waves of her brushed, yet un-styled, hair. This painting conflicts dramatically with others of the starving and dead representations of Meinhof that form part of this cycle.

The paintings of Ulrike Meinhof and Gudrun Ensslin behave differently to *September* for they play on the relationship that the viewer may or may not have with the memory of the individuals represented. Our position becomes that of the thinking, active viewer: the gazes of Ulrike and Gudrun turn back on us and on to our ethical position that determines interpretation. The fact that much speculation has been made regarding whether the artist was sympathetic to the group only reinforces the expectation of the artist as a moral agent. But surely one comes to these works informed enough to appreciate the complexities and the different expectations within all forms of morality? The images are non-committal, for the meaning changes for each viewer as long as they do indeed *think* the image.

¹¹⁸ Gerhard Richter, *Jugendbildnis (Youth Portrait)* (672-1), 1988, Oil on canvas, 67 x 62 cm.

The act of painting separates the memory from the event; Richter refuses a flash of redemption by homogenizing the photograph as a medium and therefore inverting moments in history, reinforcing that it is the technique and composition of the image that determine how one looks. By homogenizing the representation of the event, Richter strips away the memory of a moral position that is at odds with how one might expect to encounter the image.

In the instance of Richter's *October* cycle, the artist is *thinking* the found image, activating his own engagement through the painted surface. By doing so the artist reinforces Didi-Huberman's defence against his critics, who claim that the photographic image is a "lie." Regardless of the *information* that the rescued prints may or may not contain, Didi-Huberman claims that leaving these moments of memory unlooked upon culminates in a refusal that "mixes impossibility with illegitimacy," therefore making "every image an object of prohibition and of eradication."¹¹⁹ For when Richter paints these subjects of history, he challenges the way we identify human presence with real historical events. And while he presents a practice that thinks through the activity of making, his practice acts as a critique on the interpretative imperative. How can an artist state a claim through the painted surface, any more than we can recognise the whole thinking behind a choice of image captured through the photograph?

The paintings invite us to spend time thinking about the nature of what art can be, for it is the act of *looking* and giving time to this act that conflicts with the experience of

¹¹⁹ Didi-Huberman, *Images in Spite of All*, 156. Author also cites Rancière, who recognises the unrepresentable as transforming "the problem of regulating representative distance into problems of the impossibility of representation." He continues the quote: "The interdiction then slips into this impossibility, all the while denying itself, offering itself as a simple consequence of the properties of the object." Thus the event becomes something of "sacred terror." See Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible* (London ; New York: Continuum International Publishing Group Ltd., 2006). 43-44.

viewing these works on an ethical level; thus the artist challenges what it means to identify human presence with real historical events. The emotional response to these paintings relates to the imagination, regardless of whether these works are studies in copying newspaper clippings or works from memory, for they act on one's intellectual and emotional reactions to the *montage* of knowledge. Therefore, Richter's renditions return our gaze back to memory, which requires a negotiation of how the act of looking is informed, thus highlighting the failure and absences of representation in the photograph. In 1966, a young Gerhard Richter tells the interviewer: "To talk about painting is not only difficult but perhaps pointless, too."¹²⁰ The artist continues: "You can only express in words what words are capable of expressing, what language can communicate. Painting has nothing to do with that."¹²¹ The artist suggests that language in writing and speech is almost too limited when looking at a painting. However, if one accepts that it is impossible to gain a direct translation from a single image, that we have to introduce our imagination to engage with the work on an intellectual or emotional level, then language becomes active in the experience. It is the method by which we negotiate what is present and what is absent in the image that allows us to negotiate ideas and renders the possibility of interpreting our experience of artwork.

On Titian

Richter has described himself as a 'classical painter' and he has discussed the difficulties that he encountered when comparing himself with the ideal he had set for himself. When explaining the reason behind the first attempt at *Annunciation after Titian*, the series of six paintings made in 1973, the artist says that he simply wanted to own a version of the picture after seeing it while representing Germany during the

¹²⁰ Belz, *Gerhard Richter Painting*.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*

Venice Biennale. The first attempt was painted directly from a postcard and, to his mind, presented a failure of representation. So the artist continued to work on the concept of reproducing the original through a further five pictures, each of which became more abstract and less visually representative of the original than the last. Richter has described these works as a record of his defeat. The “helplessness” of success, as he describes it, is, to Richter’s mind, the source for the *Grey* paintings.¹²² I would suggest that these works function more as studies than the *Grey* paintings, for they have an incompleteness in the effort of appropriating technique, while maintaining a relationship between Titian’s painting, the photographic print, and a contemporary art practice. Adding to this what the original picture represents, I believe that this ‘failure’ works beyond the activity of painting itself, for the Annunciation is the moment of non-representation. He conceptually creates the gap between his practice and the original; but in doing so, subverts the engagement with the very famous and somewhat iconic painting by Titian.

We come to historical paintings as we might a photograph of a historical event, having learned how to look and gain the experience of seeing the work and therefore, not necessarily intellectually engaging with it beyond someone else’s interpretation. Richter’s effort activates the original through this act of subversion, for we not only think about his practice, but also our relationship with the original and the activity of Titian as a painter. As with the fresco at San Marco, the interpretation of Titian’s *Annunciation* presents a moment when Christianity and art historical narrative meet. Titian represents Mary, the very figure of non-experience, at the moment when the Angel Gabriel tells her that she is to bear the Son of God. While the empty space at the centre of the fresco has become the subject of speculation, the narrative on which both

¹²² Dietmar Elger and Hans Ulrich Obrist, *Gerhard Richter - Text: Writings, Interviews and Letters 1961-2007: Writings and Interviews, 1961-2007* (Thames & Hudson, 2009), 191. Richter quoted in interview with Christiane Vielhaber, 1986.

are based contains the absences that its believers accept as a religious truth, and therefore, the reason for viewers to accept the transcendental experience that supposedly goes beyond language.

Robert Storr's discussion of Richter's *Annunciation* painting reveals the ideas behind this work: Richter copies the Titian like a student, attempting the techniques of the Old Master. However, in doing so, the artist also creates an act of defiance,¹²³ for he uses painting – the same medium used by Titian – to create a representation as flat as the image found in the postcard, only giving movement back by activating the colours and imagery beyond what is presented, to form a series of progressively more abstract paintings. In much the same way that narratives attached to such works of art as Titian's original are recognised as sacred, the paintings too become sacred images, visited by the pilgrimages of tourists to Italy's churches.

In creating these works, Richter very conspicuously betrays this art tradition and betrays the idea of the image as sacred. By approaching the image found in a postcard and by attempting to represent exactly what can be seen in the first of the *Annunciation* paintings on the scale of the original, he turns the painting practice against itself. The original painting becomes lost in Richter's unsatisfying rendition. As the series progresses, Richter's renditions take over the memory of the figurative representation, making the absences ever more apparent. A different kind of vividness appears in these works, making Crimp's analysis of the index in both painting and photography somewhat equivocal and representative of how Richter refuses to treat abstraction and image-based painting as two separate tendencies.¹²⁴

¹²³ Robert Storr, *Gerhard Richter: Forty Years of Painting* (The Museum of Modern Art, 2002), 65. On the occasion of "Gerhard Richter: Forty Years of Painting", MoMA, New York, 2002.

¹²⁴ Mark Godfrey, "Introduction", *Gerhard Richter: Panorama* (London: Tate Publishing, 2011).

Number 343-1 (image 12) was presented as part of the exhibition at Tate Modern in London, hanging uneasily among other works from this period. Through the experience of seeing this exhibition, curated to reflect the artist's career chronologically, one could recognise the potential of an alternative approach to engaging the visitor, for these works act as an abstraction that render the figurative absent, in the same way as the *Grey* paintings. And in fact, the series of these paintings are rarely presented together, each being a distinct work that represents the contemporary activity of thinking about the painted surface in relation to the visual source material in order to think the image.

Douglas Crimp has defined the 'aura' of painting as determined by the hand of the artist, while in photography the aura is the presence of the subject: that being the "uncontrolled and uncontrollable intrusion of reality."¹²⁵ When Richter's rendition is at its most representational of the original, it is flat like the postcard image: the painted surface acquires the homogenous tonality resulting from photomechanical reprocessing. All colour levels become the same and the mark-making is reduced to a flat surface. The *Annunciation* paintings act as an example of the artist negating the aura of painting and photography by subverting the expectation of finding a subject, and indeed, some form of recognition of Titian's original: here the subject and artwork becomes lost in the missing original.

Robert Storr writes that the aura of the painting relates back to the expectation from the viewer when encountering a 'masterpiece', but the aura has become depleted through what he describes as the "routine reproduction of images."¹²⁶ The artist reduces the original painting through its representation in a postcard, thereby rendering it to the status of an inactive artefact. We are then able to recognise that the image

¹²⁵ Douglas Crimp, "The Photographic Activity of Postmodernism," *October*, The MIT Press, 15 (Winter 1980): 95.

¹²⁶ Storr, *September*, 46.

must relate back to a narrative in order for it to function as either contemporary artwork or as the sacred art historical masterpiece.

What makes these artworks contemporary is the refusal of technique, and the conceptual place they inhabit when the expectation of the viewer is activated by an attempt to define what can be seen. As when witnessing Alex's gesture of taking the photographs in the camps, one has to negotiate the contemporary condition of looking, which, Didi-Huberman argues, helps us to contest the *uselessness* of the rescued print. Here Richter is activating the viewer in thinking the original through his own creative engagement with it, and therefore thinking the idea of the image in relation to the activity of making. We are asked to view the work by Titian in the same moment as viewing a contemporary artwork, thus creating the moment when an appreciation of realism, control of light and movement (as recognised in a traditional reading within art historical discourse) is played out against two aspects of viewing a contemporary work of art. The first aspect is the *failure* of this work as a copy; the second is an awareness of a post-conceptual framework within which the artist works. By thinking in these terms, one is able to identify the *gesture* of the artist, to relate to the activity of the artist as thinking through the process of making.

Grey Paintings – interpretation in light of Didi-Huberman

The late 1960s and early 1970s was a moment when ideas and the manifestation of art through concept and performativity rendered painting a neglected art form – unless, that is, it was imbued with irony or self-deprecation. As Mark Godfrey explains, at the turn of the 1970s, despite his continuing success as a painter, Richter found himself in a period where he felt painting was not being taken seriously.¹²⁷ In 1969, Richter had

¹²⁷ Serota and Godfrey, *Gerhard Richter*, 73. : “Artists who trained as painters were turning to performance, photo-text works, film and video, and American abstract

his first institutional exhibition in Aachen and then in Dusseldorf (1971), continuing this acclaim when representing Germany in Venice. However, as the artist explained to Robert Storr in 2002, it was a time when he felt on the outside: “I don’t know where I was,” he said.¹²⁸ It was another ten years before shows such as *A New Spirit of Painting* exhibition at the Royal Academy in London in 1981, when the artist felt reassured of his status within contemporary art.

Learning of this difficult period in Richter’s professional career provides a biographical insight into our experience of his *Grey* paintings and informs our appreciation of other works by the artist. However, there still remains much beyond this; the colour grey, as Richter describes it himself, has an “inconspicuousness” to it. It has a quality that takes our gaze to edges of visual recognition, to a vividness perhaps, and has “the capacity to mediate, to make visible, in a positively illusionistic way, like a photograph. It has the capacity that no other colour has, to make ‘nothing’ visible.”¹²⁹

Richter’s paintings bridge the gap between the referential and the non-referential. While I might relate the paintings back to the historical narratives they come out of, and therefore inevitably remain tied to during the process of interpretation, the absences surrounding these events, rendered by the artist through the making process, pulls the artworks away from the historical reference. When we attempt to make a painting intelligible to a reality external to the paint itself, then we perform an act of translation where language might seem to do the opposite, folding any identification to the referential back on itself and away from the artwork.

painting seemed increasingly sterile. Faced with this situation, German painters, with the notable exception of Blinky Palermo, were resorting to irony.”

¹²⁸ Godfrey, *Gerhard Richter*, 303. See footnote 3 on page 73, which refers to Gerhard Richter and Robert Storr in conversation, 2002.

¹²⁹ Elger and Obrist, *Gerhard Richter - Text*, 92. Gerhard Richter, quoted in a letter to Edy de Wilde, 23 February 1975.

The *Grey* paintings cannot be related to an identifiable narrative. Hence, they provide the opportunity to consider our engagement with what appears to be the non-representable, and challenge the assertion that a visual experience remains outside of all use of language. If we consider interpretation in terms of translation, we assume the process leaves something of the meaning behind. The same occurs with the metaphor, for it acts as the stand-in for the *real*. However, we might call into question the process of thinking about artworks and how they function within language. As soon as you attempt to identify what it is that you see in the *Grey* paintings, you are cut short. This occurs at the point that we attempt to use language; even the process of thinking about what one is identifying is within the realm of a familiar use of language in response to art practice. This is why I return back to the artwork, to respond to it as directly as possible. Thinking about Richter's practice in terms of an attempt to use language to describe it, there is a bridging between the image and the language at the same point of collapse. The work encourages us to push the attempt to *think* the image within language and then the paint itself refuses complete identification with the representational.

Considering the activity of making these paintings, it is the repetition and continuation of the greys mixed with white that are striking, in comparison to those that have one shade of the colour throughout. But this shade is deceptive, like the black sky in the rescued photograph that represents a space of non-event. What confounds the gaze with Richter's *Grey* paintings is the effect that the shade of grey has on an interpretation, for it is difficult to look at these paintings without attempting to decipher recognisability, even if this is a way of experiencing the work of art, as opposed to wanting to find anything visually available to meet our gaze.

For Richter, grey was "the welcome and only possible equivalent for indifference, non-commitment, absence of opinion, absence of shape." He compared the colour to

formlessness, for it “can be real only as an idea.”¹³⁰ These canvasses are able to render one’s gaze as non-committal and ambivalent as the colour grey. While Richter claims that grey is only as real as an idea, these paintings allow for a consideration of what ‘real’ means beyond idea, when considering the correlation and position of eye to imagination in the moment of perception.

Richter wrote that he began painting the canvases when he was lost for knowing what to paint and that “So wretched a start could lead to nothing meaningful.” As the artist continued, he identified the differences in the quality of the grey surfaces, which he found to betray nothing of what he describes as a “destructive motivation,” which lay behind them. He wrote, “By generalizing a personal dilemma, they resolved it.”¹³¹ This extract presents reassurance, for the artist proposes that the colour is representative of the ambiguity with which Richter has chosen to paint the canvas. And if nothing is meaningful, then perhaps we disregard the *Grey* paintings, for a painting of an absence of sorts, of *nothing meaningful*, is unworthy of thought.

And yet in this letter, Richter speaks of the materiality of the colour grey and how that relates to a philosophical position concerned with that materiality. When he claims that the canvasses “betrayed nothing of the destructive motivation that lay behind them”, he speaks of his own body in the process of making art. This division of the self might be characteristic of the postmodern artist as Crimp discusses, but it is also a division between artwork and artist, as much as the activity of thinking through making.

Osborne writes that in Richter’s painting “the photographic image becomes not merely the subject matter of the painting but also, ...the object of reflection on the

¹³⁰ Ibid. He continues: “all I can do is create a colour nuance that means grey but is not it. The painting is then a mixture of grey as a fiction and grey as a visible, designated area of colour.”

¹³¹ Ibid., 91.

relationship between its varying social functions and representational form.”¹³² Thus Richter presents the possibilities and limitations of photography as a method for recording memory, and thereby offers a potential for re-engagement with the past. However, but when it comes to the *Grey* paintings, the potential for this engagement is much more difficult. However, while these works lack figuration, they function as all Richter’s works do, in the refusal to reconcile the painting with its subject and the subject with the event.

The experience of art is a result of an emotional and intellectual investment by the viewer and the artist. In the case of the *Grey* paintings, absences of information in the visual displace the gaze. In this way, we may be led to thinking of these works in terms of photography to comfort the inability to *see*, thus returning the painting back to the relatable. Scenarios are therefore created to reassure the dialectical work between the eye and the mind.

The gesture of the artist/the writer

“The image is neither *nothing*, nor *one*, nor *all*... ‘No single image’ actually *tells* the Shoah, yet ‘all the images’ *speak* only of it.”¹³³

When looking upon the image and attempting to write a description of it, the moment of contemplating the visual within the image can become lost, despite our use of words to relate the image back, and to help us locate and describe what we *see*. Furthermore, one can think about the activity of writing about the image as a way to consider notions of acceptability and assumptions of knowledge in relation to the image. While I have engaged with Didi-Huberman’s activity of writing around and about the rescued images, I am conscious that there is another activity at play as I write this chapter. My own writing practice, in response to my curatorial and research

¹³² Peter Osborne, *Gerhard Richter*, 95.

¹³³ Didi-Huberman, *Images in Spite of All*, 151.

experience, becomes entwined as I approach Richter's practice from my own experience of working alongside artists and from my own cultural background.

The emphasis that Didi-Huberman places on the ethical continues throughout *Images in Spite of All*, sometimes hidden in theory and philosophy but remaining part of a commitment to *say* that is increasingly realised towards the end of the book. In hindsight, this can be identified from the outset of his essay,¹³⁴ for this was my specific experience of reading the book and responding to it through note-taking, in addition to my own understanding of the Holocaust.

The author presents a key to his own activity of writing through this stance. The subject of morality is found, linked to an ethical reading, and for the author, it is fundamental when approaching these images to know *how* to ask the question. But there are no absolute answers, or easy conclusions made in this essay. There is no hint as to where the reader might find these answers (or conclusions). And so, as with Richter's painting, what we take away from the experience of engaging with the writer's practice is our own personal interpretation, where we place the ideas found into the visual and linguistic memory.

This commitment to a specific ethical stance affects the method through which Didi-Huberman reads these images, for he presents a method for looking, regardless of whether he states what it is he is looking at. Thus, as much as it remains a re-evaluation of what one thinks can be perceived, the essay remains a grappling with what might, or might not immediately or ever, be *seen*. The specific readings of the photographs from Auschwitz that "abruptly attend our own absence"¹³⁵ become objects from which an evaluation of a universal reading of images is made. These images are "snatched" from the real, "snatched from human thought in general..."

¹³⁴ Ibid., 154. A key sentence reads: "before displaying one's moralist stance, one should know how to ask and situate the ethical question itself."

¹³⁵ Didi-Huberman, *Images in Spite of All*. Jorge Semprun quoted. See Introductions to sections titled "Fact-Image or Fetish Image [51]."

something imaginable that no one until then had ever conceived as possible-...”¹³⁶

Form had to be given to this “unimaginable reality.”¹³⁷

Engaging with the rescued prints, Didi-Huberman challenges conventional methods of looking at and engaging with artefacts, to consider the purpose of the activity of looking and what it is we hope to gain. Throughout the essay, the author challenges our perception of what separates the image of an event from the memory, through the use of written documents, testimonial and the filmic representation. He makes a case for the imagination beyond the surface of what is found, thus offering a means for approaching the notion of the image as something separate (or related) to forms of reading and writing.

Didi-Huberman, therefore, presents a method for considering how these photographs function, and through this engagement one is able to recognise how the art historian identifies strategies that we, as contemporary viewers, use in order to seek an engagement with the past and better appreciate the elements that make up the artwork. By recognising that the *unimaginable* and *unrepresentable* are terms based in the dialectical narratives associated with history and art, one is able to consider the ways in which the visual is embedded in language from the start.

Ethical stance: writer and painter

By thinking in terms of what creates a fetish object, the reader gains an understanding of Didi-Huberman’s position and the ethical stance from which he writes. By analysing elements concerning the fetish in *Images in Spite of All*, one is able to look at Richter’s practice and consider a case for the idea of thinking-as-making. Didi-Huberman writes that these photographs, which together form a culminating montage object of sorts, cannot be isolated into individual photographs. By reframing these

¹³⁶ Ibid., 6.

¹³⁷ Ibid., 9.

segments into independent images, one turns them into fetish objects, for the narrative that refuses to be consolidating would be ignored and thus rendered redundant.

To approach the idea of the fetish object, Didi-Huberman references Jacques Lacan's theory, comparing the fetish to the freeze-frame, as a reduction of the "full, signifying scene"; a veil of a "screen-memory" over the event.¹³⁸ Didi-Huberman presents the question as posed by Lacan: "Why is the veil more precious to man than reality? Why does the order of this illusory relation become an essential, necessary element of its relationship with the object?"¹³⁹

Fetishism is concerned with ownership, of keeping an event or a person as one wants them to be: inanimate one might say. These four prints show the before and after: the moment prior to, and after, the killings. Therefore an element of the narrative remains out of visual representation and is left within the imagination – if one allows it to be. These photographs might stand between the *real* event and our understanding of it, but the isolated image can consolidate our gaze in order to understand it, as it renders the narrative still. However, and in line with Richter's position on the rescued prints, these images refuse to become 'inanimate'. They continue to maintain subjective and intersubjective ownership¹⁴⁰ unlike the fetish object, regardless of any attempt to isolate them.

When attempting to locate interpretation surrounding Richter's practice, one can access interviews and the artist's own writings on the subject of his painting. In both cases, a distinction between an intention in the making and the resulting meaning becomes apparent. The former is apparent through quotations, and yet the work itself defies an attempt to link ideas to the final artwork. As a viewer, one can instead

¹³⁸ Ibid., 77–78.

¹³⁹ Ibid, 78. See author's footnote to Lacan, *Le séminaire*, 158.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., 77. See author's footnote to Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire, IV: La relation d'objet (1956-57) (Paris: Le Seuil, 1994)*.

associate other ways of thinking about the artwork, bringing one's own experiences to the encounter with the work of art.

When discussing *September*, the artist described his intention to deal with the event as a subject without making it spectacular. The "awful fascination" of the images of the planes crashing into the Twin Towers on the 11th September 2001, as he discusses it with Serota, shares something with the problem of approaching a form of discussion around the photographs from Auschwitz. For Richter, it is not only the image that he is painting, but also the associative knowledge and concerns that come with looking that are experienced by the viewer. Therefore one has to appreciate the strong conceptual position that Richter begins from when he paints.

Richter's *September* confronts our gaze with the familiar while questioning our assumption of naming. The painting is representative of numerous images that we have become numb to. The four rescued photographs stand alone as part of a much longer historical moment. Rescued and rare imagery from Auschwitz are fragments of a longer and slower disaster, not an event of instant devastation: they are slow in that the effect of the content is devoid of the sudden shock of the event. The blurring that is representative of Alex's haste in taking the photographs is contradicted by the length and magnitude of the horrors of Auschwitz and beyond. The magnitude is the contradiction of these small, naïve, momentary shots, as opposed to the larger and calculated horrors imposed on humanity.

Didi-Huberman's idea of dispersal, and the plurality of meaning, can be aligned with Douglas Crimp's description of a pluralism founded in postmodernism. Crimp describes a presence that is based on an absence, an "unbridgeable distance from the original, from even the possibility of the original."¹⁴¹ Crimp discusses the photographic activity of artists, which is another area where I would relate Didi-

¹⁴¹ Douglas Crimp, "The Photographic Activity of Postmodernism," *October* 15 (Winter 1980): 92.

Huberman's writing on the rescued images directly to Richter's painting. As a contemporary condition, we continuously go through moments of dividing the self between lived experience and memory. The strangeness in Richter's work might be where the familiarity of the image, reproduced to create a fiction, is 'fetishized' through a process of work evident in the craft of the painted surface. The blur seems almost to insult the eye, for the painter's accuracy in reproducing the movement in the original photo could be replaced with something more recognisable. But to do so would be to alter the memory, and by refusing to give the recognisable to the representation, the artist reinforces the absences of experience, despite our being present in the moment. A good example is the two paintings representing his daughter as a child, titled *Betty, 1977*?¹⁴² ¹⁴³ (images 17 and 18). We are faced with a girl who stares back with recognition of the gaze, so strikingly direct that one might almost fear to look. When the image becomes blurred in the second painting, the refusal is heightened by our own awareness of being asked to look and then refused in one instant. The artist challenges the conventions of looking and refuses the fetishist gaze. Richter reminds the viewer that any found image is only an object, decipherable and significant through the imaginative and speculative relation to events.¹⁴⁴

Conclusion

By bringing the writing of George Didi-Huberman together with work by Gerhard Richter, my aim has been to consider what it means to encounter the image, and to think about the ways in which we negotiate our proximity to the historical event through images, and the use of language. By thinking about Richter's practice and a method of thinking-as-making, I have presented a method to evaluate what one

¹⁴² Gerhard Richter, *Betty* (425-4), 1977, Oil on canvas, 30 x 40 cm.

¹⁴³ Gerhard Richter, *Betty* (425-5), 1977, Oil on canvas, 50 x 40 cm.

¹⁴⁴ Didi-Huberman, *Images in Spite of All*, 112.

imagines to be visually available and what is absent, based on a language associated with one's imagination.

By considering the photographs rescued from Auschwitz, one is able to think about what it means to look and to re-evaluate the information we bring when we look at any photograph: to *think* the image. Through this, one is able to consider the activity of the artist as a process of thinking through making, and therefore is able to engage with the artist's conceptual and creative practice.

Richter creates artworks that render the idea of an image at once present and then absent. Through the activity of thinking about his process of work, any attempt at interpretation becomes embedded in the recognition of the artist's conceptual concern with the craft and effect of the painted image. The viewer is thus confronted with an artwork that unsettles the activity of identification; the paintings ask the viewer to question how and what it means to attempt to recognise the subject found in the photographic image. As discussed, the Baader Meinhof Group paintings can be interpreted in part as a means of approaching the concern of the ethical in art-making, for the act of painting separates the memory from the event in the initial instance, and beyond. Through technique and composition, the artist shifts our method of looking, stripping the memory of a moral position, which is at odds with how one encounters the image. With the 'abstract' *Grey* paintings, there is a sense of the non-visual, in which Richter explores the potential of, as he puts it, "an absence of opinion, (an) absence of shape.... real only as an idea."¹⁴⁵ Therefore it is not only the lack of figuration that creates a sense of "indifference" or "non-commitment"; the artist's mediation with the colour also functions as a refusal to reconcile the painting with its subject and, therefore, any idea of an event that one might attempt to reconcile it with. Thinking in terms of the link between the image and what the image stands in for provides an opportunity for a contemporary engagement with the archive image.

¹⁴⁵ Elger and Obrist, *Gerhard Richter - Text*, 92.

Recognising the moments of absences allows one to engage with the artwork with reference to the historical event, for as I have sought to show, much of Richter's work appears to act as an attempt to deal with the unsayable, or the unspoken or unwritten. When Richter fills the canvas with a colour that lacks a representation of a visual or an object, he challenges the notion of what is visually present and absent. The gaze is unable to be fulfilled; the desire to see is always refused and so the imagination is set into motion.

Richter's practice acts as a reminder that not all is presentable within the fixed moment of photography. And I would claim, in keeping with the analysis of Didi-Huberman's writing, not all might be summed up in the description found in a text in response to an artwork or the artefact. The act of looking allows one to appreciate that the gaze is already informed with ideas external to the experience. By looking at Richter's art practice next to an in-depth reading of Didi-Huberman's *Images in Spite of All*, I have been able to consider the activity against our expectation of the artist's gesture and against that of the writer's, and to consider the gesture of both in relation to our social and personal experience of historical events.

When Didi-Huberman writes that the image is "the very attestation of absence" he speaks of the photographic image. But by using the photographic image as source material, Richter imbues the discipline of painting with a conceptual framework that unsteadies our encounter with his practice and the memory of the event. While the artist's hand creates a sense of skill and authorship, Richter's conceptual refusal of a clear correlation between object and subject reminds us that an absence remains in all images, despite an ability to render something present. Thus, the image bears witness to a disappearance while simultaneously resisting it.

When Richter speaks of the photographs he first encountered in *Images in Spite of All*, he describes the difference between the expectation and content and how the contrast between the surface and content renders them "appalling." The appalling is the effect

of *looking upon* the event, while the images, blurred and yet frozen in time, render the photographs immediate, yet inappropriate. The appalling can also be linked to the awareness of the temporal conditions we live in, for looking upon these images is a moment when the present clashes with the past.

The *unrepresentable* is a moral, and often political position, which turns subjects and ideas into a taboo. When referring to historical narratives, events are accepted, yet remain outside the realm of representation, and often discussion. The *unimaginable*, meanwhile, is the impossibility of imagination, of linking the image to the language of description. Thus, the event is so *unbelievable* that it is beyond what can be visually manifest: the *unimaginable* is the impossibility to *think* the event. However, the nature of the unimaginable would suggest that either the image or the imagination is absent when the other is present. And so it can be understood in terms of the individual's subjective opinion, as much as the unrepresentable. In both cases, it is the result of a choice of acceptance or refusal on the part of the viewer.

Richter's practice settles the artist's experience alongside that of the viewer to insist that we come to the painting with our own ideas and experiences. While we share in the contemporary, and bring this to each encounter with these artworks, the interpretation results in the dialectical moment between the visual and the imagination; this can unsettle what has come to be accepted. The artist, thus, uses the craft of painting to adjust and unsettle our gaze, ultimately making the narrative found in his work the montage of private and public, lived and learned histories.

Through the engagement with Didi-Huberman's writing, my intention has been to show that the choices we make in language impact on our experience of art. We have seen how Didi-Huberman uses the language of art theory and beyond to approach non-art images, while I have sourced writing from inside and outside the traditions of art historical writing language, and more evidently Didi-Huberman's writing on the found photographs, to re-evaluate our experience of the artworks.

Didi-Huberman's method of engaging with the visual object of the four prints relates to my experience of working alongside contemporary artists, for their practice is often informed with disparate visual and non-visual material, brought together to create alternative approaches to the visual world. I believe one can take this as a method for re-evaluating the work of artists, and so my intention has been to open a discussion on art that considers how the artist thinks through the activity of making.

We can think about the activity of making-as-thinking in order to gain a different perspective of the artwork. While art history informs our experience of art, engaging with the artwork through other forms of reading, and thinking about the activity of writing in response, provide a potential for new experience. It also allows us to accept the absences in the work, by virtue of our not knowing the mind of the artist. Indeed, I believe that my own engagement with art through the gesture of writing has been informed by the methods used by artists. Therefore, I would suggest that by looking at other aspects away from the life of the artist, one is able to find alternative methodology for an engagement with art practice.

Chapter two

The performance and undoing of writing: Hanne Darboven's *24 Gesänge opus 14, 15 a, b 1984*

Language can only deal meaningfully with a special, restricted segment of reality. The rest, and it is presumably the much larger part, is silence.¹⁴⁶

This chapter focuses on a set of themes in the artwork of Hanne Darboven, as an attempt to propose a method for engaging with the piece titled *24 Gesänge opus 14, 15 a, b 1984* [*24 songs opus 14, 15 a, b 1984*] (images 26 and 27). Firstly, I consider this work to be *literary*, given that our gaze is placed upon a series of written signs, regardless of the fact that these are numerical. Secondly, while an encounter with this artwork is highly visual – given the object-hood of this piece – the experience comes, in part, from an attempt to engage beyond the art object itself. This chapter will consider ideas that relate to theories and thinking around modern and contemporary art practice. In addition, I will introduce themes found in literature, theatre and music that I believe open up the potential for our experience with the artwork within and beyond the gallery setting.

Darboven's work places the body and mind of the viewer firmly within the experience of the artwork. In the case of *24 Gesänge opus 14, 15 a, b 1984*, the viewer is physically surrounded by the piece, for the installation takes up an entire room within the gallery setting. Therefore, it invites engagement as it visually engages the viewer from all angles. Furthermore, the evidence of the artist's process, found in the work

¹⁴⁶George Steiner, "The Retreat from the Word", in *George Steiner: A Reader* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), 283-304. Steiner links language in speech to the written word as that which presents an idea, of making the abstract into a particular by the means of translation.

itself, leads to an identification with the artist's activity and thinking process through making.

This artwork is an installation made up of framed sheets of paper annotated with numbers set to the lines traditionally used to guide music composition. Each sheet contains a card that announces the details of a christening, as is traditional in Germany. These are cards collected by the artist, but they seem to bear no personal relationship with the artist, forming a kind of archive. While the viewer attempts to engage with the framed sheets, the sound of a recording based on the composition is heard, forming a steady paced, unmelodic tune. This element of performativity persistently remains outside of the experience of the artwork as one embarks on an attempt to *read* the visual language presented.

I only use numbers because it is a way of writing without describing. It has nothing to do with mathematics. Nothing! I choose numbers because they are so constant, confined, and artistic. Numbers are probably the only real discovery of mankind.¹⁴⁷

In the first instance, when encountering this artwork, one is struck by the visual impact of the numbers, the patterns they create and the impression made when so many are placed in front of the gaze. This quotation suggests that numbers are concrete and therefore reassuring: a language that can change and shift while always returning to the same quantity of itself.

The artist assigns numbers to a musical note, placed into rows and columns that make up a numerical series to create instructions for the organist. When first encountering the work, the ordered numbers remain rigid, strictly placed and contained within the artwork. The christening cards and the music playing in the background, however, create a sense of an elsewhere, outside the encounter, and so a sense of the

¹⁴⁷ Lucy R. Lippard, "Hanne Darboven: Deep in Numbers", *Artforum*, October 1973.

inconclusive and unknowing is created. Our eyes return once more to the numbers found in the panels. One might assume that they are encountering a self-sufficient system that requires the reader to follow a path contrary to formal logic, but in fact there is a coherence that engages the viewer in attempting to translate the numbers into some form of pattern and meaning. Thus the work appears to present something of an instruction, of an ordered process in an attempt to describe. As George Steiner might say, one supposes an activity of turning the abstract into particulars in an act of translation.

Conversely, an alternative approach is to think in terms of *24 Gesänge opus 14, 15 a, b 1984* as refusing the viewer's expectation of engagement. For all its volume and detail, it lacks what we might describe as an accessible visual imagery within a known understanding of art. Another way of *seeing* the work is to think of it as stripped and minimal. And while as a counter-argument this *bareness* allows the work to sit within a history of minimalist art, the conceptual elements associated to and beyond the object-hood undeniably present render a weight to the material. The piece is confounding in its expansiveness, not only in terms of the physicality of the work we find in the gallery setting, but also because of the potential for engaging with the parts that are not visually present at the time of the encounter. The specific cultural past and individuals that make up the work create layers of references outside the engagement with the artwork. We shift between spaces, between the world of art, and the interpretative imperative that must recognise the very absences and impossibility of containing one fixed, true idea of the piece as one object work of art. Therefore, when one encounters the work of Darboven there is a shift between different forms of reading, depending on how one chooses to engage with what is visually available. I would add that the translation of the numbers into music, as proposed by Darboven and realised in the context of the presentation of *24 Gesänge opus 14, 15 a, b 1984*

through a pre-recorded performance, is what presents a literary aspect to this work.¹⁴⁸ However, through the musical rendition, language is obscured further to an abstract experience. To engage with the work of art as an object, we return to the physical structure, the number-writing and the christening cards. And still the multilayers found within the conceptual and physical object create an in-determinacy that resists conclusive interpretation.

One might also consider the work as evidence of the artist as diarist exposing the working process and yet any attempt at interpretation places the viewer too close to speculation, rendering it superfluous. The visual content takes us away from the work itself and so absences become manifest in what remains of the artist's gesture.

It is this, the inability to link aspects of the experience, that creates a rupture between the physical and conceptual object of the artwork, thus broadening the space between the encounter with the work of art and, in relation to my own experience, writing about it. It also acts as a means to consider the artist's activity of making, while the possibility of aporia, that occurs at the point when the conceptual meets the visual, provides an opportunity to consider what we see and do not see in the experience of art.

Art History and associative narratives: case study.

From the late 1960s onwards, many artists in Europe and North American were using language, numbers and measurements, whether as a technique for considering the rationale of systems, or as a method for presenting the aesthetic potential of symbols and objects that unsettled the viewer's expectations. In the December 1967 issue of *Artforum*, Mel Bochner's article titled "The Serial Attitude" began with the sentence,

¹⁴⁸ As presented at "Hanne Darboven", Camden Arts Centre, London, 20th January – 18th March, 2012.

“The serial order is a method, not a style.”¹⁴⁹ In the article Bochner describes variants of what this art was and could be, at no point limiting this to a group of artists, although only referencing his immediate North American contemporaries, with quotations from artist Sol LeWitt, musician Milton Babbitt and linguist Joseph Greenberg.

Claiming that it was an attitude distinct from other art practices that continually returned to the same subject, he set out the terms for the artist working in seriality:

1-the derivation of the terms or interior divisions of the work is by means of a numerical or otherwise systematically predetermined process (permutation, progression, rotation, reversal); 2 – The order takes precedence over the execution; 3 – The completed work is fundamentally parsimonious and systematically self-exhausting.¹⁵⁰

This essay provides a method with which to consider the execution of (and the final object of) *Gesänge opus 14, 15 a, b 1984* in light of Darboven’s other work, for it sets her against her contemporaries and provides a potential for thinking of her practice in the light of art history, but also beyond it. While Darboven’s mathematical writing practice presents the exhaustive in process, Bochner’s assertion, by way of a quotation from LeWitt, that the form is of little importance,¹⁵¹ seems contradictory to what is found in the visual aspect of this piece. For it seems precisely calculated for an attempt by the viewer to read and therefore engage with the visual form. However, conversely, the presentation contains naïve, seemingly unplanned aspects in the visual aspect of

¹⁴⁹ Mel Bochner, “The Serial Attitude”, *Artforum*, December 1967, <<http://algodesignstrategies.files.wordpress.com/2009/03/the-serial-attitude.pdf>> [Accessed 30th May 2014].

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid*, 23.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid*, 25. Sol LeWitt quoted by Mel Bochner: “The form itself is of very limited importance, it becomes the grammar for the total work.”

the writing, as though the activity of writing is without a considered aesthetic dimension, running parallel with the practice of her contemporaries.

Bochner provides a theoretical position from which to consider Darboven's writing practice. He quotes Joseph Greenberg in his *Essays in Linguistics*, stating that language can be approached as a "set of culturally transmitted behaviour patterns shared by a group or a system conforming to the rules which constitute its grammar."¹⁵² Bochner makes the claim that practically all systems can be rendered isomorphic with another containing one serial relation, and therefore a system can be reordered. He refers to speech and writing as an example of how this is the case, recognising that the ordering in time of speech corresponds to the ordering of direction in writing.

Relating speech to the activity of writing provides an interesting position, for it activates a possible visceral dimension to the conceptual practices of these artists who might, in the first instance, appear dry and uninviting to the viewer. Once we think of writing within the activity of speech, we activate the imagination in the encounter, for to speak one has to place the discussion into words in order to communicate thought. I would also claim that this idea of language acting as a "set of culturally transmitted behaviour patterns" has a potential for considering language outside of the encounter with art, in order to then bring it back and create fresh observations and experiences of the artwork.

While *24 Gesänge opus 14, 15 a, b 1984* presents a vast visual landscape, there is an absence of a visual that we might come to expect from an artwork. This relates the artist's practice to LeWitt's quote on the serial form. However, it is necessary to think of the numbers in terms of a visual experience, whether by attempting to make sense of the structure or not. We also have the potential to reimagine our engagement with certain texts through the artist's practice, for the artist alters this relationship by

¹⁵² Ibid, 25.

turning language into material. So while one might identify her practice as intellectual given the expectation of engagement through a form of reading and one's associations with the naming of the object¹⁵³, I would argue that this offers a potential for the viewer to re-evaluate the visual aspect of text and therefore, to rethink the activity of the artist's practice.

There is a sense of an unreachable conclusion to *24 Gesänge opus 14, 15 a, b 1984*; and the language of numbers is unsettling in the artist's ceaseless, circulatory application of them. The rationale is irrational in its consistency that creates a sense of *madness* at odds with the traditions of minimalist and conceptual art. And while the containment and reduction seem allied to the male-dominated conceptualist method, the artist's use of repetitive forms, of endless writings that entice and reject interpretation, suggests an obsessive motivation attached to repetitive action.¹⁵⁴ There is a ceaselessness in the form of expression: the thinking body is present in the activity of making. This thinking body is similar to the one we find in the writing of Hélène Cixous.

In Cixous's writing one recognises a process of deconstructing her thoughts, a

¹⁵³ See for example, Hanne Darboven, *Ohne Titel (Sartre) (73 works)*, 1975-76, works on paper, 29.7 x 21 cm. (Image 30)

¹⁵⁴ Hal Foster and Rosalind Krauss, *Art Since 1900: Modernism, Antimodernism and Postmodernism* (New York, Thames & Hudson, 2004). Psychoanalysis, developed by Freud and his followers as a "science of the unconscious" at the beginning of the 20th century came around the same time as modernist art. We read of artists drawing directly on psychoanalysis – see surrealism and later 'feminist art' for example: "psychoanalysis and modernist art share several interests – a fascination with origins, with dreams and fantasies, with 'the primitive', the child, and the insane, and, more recently, with the workings of subjectivity and sexuality, to name only a few. Third, many psychoanalytic terms have entered the basic vocabulary of twentieth-century art and criticism (e.g., repression, sublimation, fetishism, the gaze)."

consideration of the logic of language that results in the “madness”¹⁵⁵ that Cixous claims to experience through the activity of her writing practice. Cixous, as the writer, acts as a witness to memory through an apprenticeship of reading and acquiring knowledge of tradition and so reading remains inseparable to the writing. And so, we are all readers, even at the point of writing. Furthermore, and in keeping with this, Cixous presents her reader with the task of writer. In her essay “Savoir”, for example, the writer disrupts the ordering of experience, and by doing so encourages us to think about the way in which we respond to our own receptive skills. Cixous, similar to Derrida, believes that the author should renounce the activity of ‘pilot’ when writing, that language itself commands the writing, allowing her to submit to the *mystery*.¹⁵⁶ I would suggest that this approach to writing is one that can be identified with the technique of writing used by Darboven, allowing for another approach to her art practice through literary thinking.

Rationale: Art historical narratives

The 2012 monographic exhibition at Camden Arts Centre highlighted Darboven’s relevance to the history of art today, also proving the distinct position she maintains in terms of a practice in relation to her contemporaries. Her work can be considered in relation to artists working with numbers and writing at the time. For example, from 4th January 1966 until the day of his death on 10th July 2014, the artist On Kawara created the *Today* series, presenting the passing of time chronologically by painting a canvas each day with the date it was painted. Each painting is only slightly differentiated from the other, depending on the colour used, the date and the place it was made. The brushstrokes of acrylic paint allow one to make out the artist’s hand and yet he only

¹⁵⁵ Marta Segarra, *The Portable Cixous* (New York, Columbia University Press, 2010), 188.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 187.

offers an enigmatic presence. Still, his is a more stable, predictable presence than Darboven's. Carl Andre, meanwhile, had been a poet before an artist, approaching and arranging words as though each were an individual entity, positioned on paper to create three-dimensional shapes that now are being recognised as providing insight into Andre's sensibility as an artist.¹⁵⁷ These works, although published in exhibition catalogues, remain separate from his sculptures in terms of how the artist chose to present them. Darboven's number-writing, however, is not only actively part of the larger sculptural work, but also activates the viewer's engagement where time becomes material itself. In works such as *Appointment Diary*, 1988–98, the activity of shifting and playfully multiplying temporalities with her own writing next to other calendars, activates the body of the artist in the space of encounter, thus engaging the viewer in the activity of making. The artist interrupts the linear chronology with film dates and deaths and births of directors and actors. Further to this, the artist notates on the diary pages day after day, which Emma Cocker describes as adding an "elasticity through her simultaneous filling and emptying of its time."¹⁵⁸ Notations, regardless of their meaning, become material refusing to mirror an attempt to read in any conventional sense.

As with much contemporary art practice, elements of the experience of the artwork rest outside the conventions of figurative art, thus offering an opportunity to consider the activity of making as separate to an attempt at interpretation. While the artist has been placed in the canon of conceptual art, as a consequence of the way in which her

¹⁵⁷ Gavin Delahunty, *Gavin Delahunty on Carl Andre's Poems*, Drawing Room Online Resources, podcast visual, November 5 2013, <https://drawingroom.org.uk/resources/gavin-delahunty-on-carl-andres-poems>. See also Gavin Delahunty, Lynn Kost (Editor), and Valerie Mavridorakis, *Carl Andre: Poems* (Zurich, Switzerland: JRP Ringier, 2013)

¹⁵⁸ Emma Cocker, "Hanne Darboven and Raphael Hefti," *Frieze*, May 1, 2012, <<https://frieze.com/article/hanne-darboven-and-raphael-hefti>> [Accessed 30th May 2014].

artwork has been assessed in relation to history and other artists, I would also concur that this assessment is based on the terms of the *image* of art as associated to an idea of visuality within the structures of the art historical discourse of the late 20th and early 21st centuries. Furthermore, while much has been written about Darboven's practice, most of the focus has been on works that present collections of found objects and images, while engagement with her more *written* work has been neglected. By considering my curatorial and writing engagement with contemporary art practice, and looking at the relationship of Darboven's practice in relation to activity traditionally outside of art history, namely other forms of literature, theatre and music, I am able to offer new reflections on her work and other routes into an engagement with *24 Gesänge opus 14, 15 a, b 1984*.

Writing/reading in relation to artistic practice

24 Gesänge opus 14, 15 a, b 1984 can provide a starting point from which to consider the absences and expectations we place on an artwork when encountering it within the gallery setting. When encountering this artwork, there are parts that one finds through the physical object-hood of the piece. Meanwhile, conceptual, non-physical elements become present in the experience, through engagement with the physical parts that remain. For example, the activity of the organist interpreting the composition found in the number writing. This too is an example of when one can identify and consider those parts of the artist's practice that can be linked to writing – to a form of *textuality*. By thinking about the work in terms of the writing and reading process undertaken by the organist, one is able to re-evaluate the *real* and imagined parts of the visual experience. Furthermore, one is able to take the same approach by attempting to read the numbers and to identify what is present and what is absent in one's own experience, during the encounter with the artwork in the gallery setting.

As with Richter's practice, and specifically the *Grey* paintings, my intention is to

focus on the artwork, considering the parts separately that together lead to the sensation of the inaccessible. The artwork might appear to shut down the potential for engagement, due to what appears to be the complexity of the piece. One way to contest this is by considering the way in which Darboven's work challenges belief in the text, as well as by challenging the assumptions we may have learned in relation to the visual and non-visual.

Several of Darboven's artworks integrate long passages from novels, poems and philosophical writing. Relating to the artist's literary activity and her use of scripts can provide an alternative way to consider *24 Gesänge opus 14, 15 a, b 1984* and a broader consideration of alternative methods for thinking about how we relate the use of language to art. Hers is a practice that provokes our need to find understanding, to reveal the secret. And while the artist said, "My secret is that I have none," seeming at first to close this down also, I hope to offer an alternative engagement with the artwork, thinking more about the literary element in relation to the work as a whole; this also realises the potential for the viewer in the encounter.

By thinking of *24 Gesänge opus 14, 15 a, b 1984* in terms of a visual and literary language, one recognises moments where connections between theoretical thinking and biographical readings of the artist's practice become confused with personal thought and one's own specific experiences during the encounter with the object of art. From this we are able to activate our own reading and interpretation in the context of the encounter with the artwork. Furthermore, the sheer expanse of these walls of notations creates a script that, while translatable, is visually overwhelming and seemingly hostile. Much as the overall structure of *24 Gesänge opus 14, 15 a, b 1984* refuses to be contained within a photographed image, shaped around a room, it refuses to present all details of the mathematical language in one single view. And yet the language of numbers creates potential because of the choices for translation that we have. Thus the potential for a more intimate engagement in the gallery is possible: the

numbers move the reader between the space of the here and the now, and those spaces elsewhere beyond the visual, to an engagement with the music that is part of, and yet being played outside of this encounter, ultimately running away from the object of art. The notations – a language of numbers – lead from one interpretation to another. However, the viewer always returns to the absences: the space between what is found in front of the gaze and what one understands or perhaps can only guess at through personal *reading*.

Darboven claims that the assertion of not understanding her work is “unbelievable and intolerant”, for “we depend on this simple mathematical system.”¹⁵⁹ It is indisputable that this system is something so fundamental it becomes *everyday*. Engrained in habits of practice outside of creativity because of a practical usefulness in many areas of life, a theory of numbers lends to what Bettina Carl describes as a “utilitarian self-confidence” in Darboven’s work, which balances “the literal and illustrative components of this art with its bias to automatic formalism.”¹⁶⁰ When encountering the numerical elements in Darboven’s work, one’s relationship to numbers is set in motion. And the presence of these numbers in an artwork is thus similar to the moment of encountering forms of text in a work of art, for one imagines an invitation to read and interpret, and yet reading, as much as interpretation, is complicated by the expectation of the language before us. Darboven claims that the numbers are simply put together in the same way as those we find, for example, on an accountant’s spread sheet, yet the visual quality as presented in an artwork holds other possibilities.

¹⁵⁹ Bettina Carl, “Hard Work Looking Easy, the Ballerinas Always Smile: Notes on the Art of Hanne Darboven”, in *Afterthought: New Writing on Conceptual Art* (London, Rachmaninoff’s, 2005), 46. “I read Darboven’s enigmatic formula ‘2=1, 2’ as simultaneously representing a progression and its end, a sum and an entity.” See also footnote to quotation found in Kira van Lil’s introduction “Hanne Darboven, Menschen and Landschaften”, Hallen für Neue Kunst, Schaffhausen, 1999, 16.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid*, 48.

So the artist's use of "mathematical prose"¹⁶¹ leaves us in a precarious position for interpretation. But it also leads to an alternative method of considering the difference between describing and imagining the essence of the work of art, as opposed to naming it into an art historical framework. Considering how an artist thinks through the activity of making engages the viewer further in his or her own specific experience of the artwork, within and beyond the context of the exhibition space. In the case of this artwork there are several different elements that, when placed in the context of the work as a whole, become sculptural within the art context. When we take them apart to consider why the artist places her number writing and the christening cards together with the sound of the organist playing, we can think more about the parts that make up our experience and engagement with the work as a whole. Here we might activate our knowledge from art historical theory, and also from our own experiences of numbers, writing and reading, of personal and public occasion, of music and the experience of doing, as realised through the experience of the artist's activity, as well as that of the organist.

Thinking through making

In 1971 Darboven began to transcribe a portion of Homer's *The Odyssey* (image 37) by hand, resulting in a fourteen-panel installation. This is an example of a highly 'textual' work, for it invites the viewer to engage with the visual object of the text: the shape of the script itself and the overall patterns created when the ink touches the paper and when the page is left blank. The artist is said to have carried out this activity at a point when she became exhausted with her own notations.¹⁶² The work is the visual evidence of that endeavour, exhausting in the expanse of text, yet evidence of a

¹⁶¹ Ibid, 50.

¹⁶² John K. Grande, "Hanne Darboven: Writing Time," *Espace*, Autumn/Fall 1991, 29–30.

quiet and modest activity of work. The artist may be merely copying, placing letters on a page. However, language is given a materiality, and writing as a process of making can be identified here particularly. The artist resists changing the original Homeric text and instead only offers a different formal approach to the poem. However, the deviation comes through in the “ ‘u’ lines” that run alongside the original narrative, oscillating between signifiers and mere marks. Thus the simple act of copying a text is opened up to other texts and other readings, rendering the prose one of several ‘voices.’¹⁶³

In this case, the activity of writing exactly to the scale of the book she is working from becomes a process of doing, of making, of a perhaps “less conscious” activity than creating something ‘original’, limited by the excessive nature of the task. The formality with which the action takes place is not reconciled with an imagined idea or image, often found when reading in the traditional sense, for the artist is not offering anything beyond the original transcript other than the activity. Thus, the emotional and intellectual part that one might associate with the act of writing is absent. The artist presents the result of an intention to find clarity through the action of writing. Therefore, the idea of transcribing, matched with a continuous desire and compulsion to write, presents Darboven’s pursuit as being distinct from the act of writing for a chosen literary audience, even though it may seem emblematic of the writer’s life. The thinking element is clearly present, but it relates to the making process, of formalising content into material.

The body remains present in the resulting object, regardless of any firm intention or final image, for often the markings made by Darboven, mixed with our consciousness of the artist’s activity, activate her body in the work despite her physical absence during our encounter. In her essay, Carl claims similarities between Darboven’s practice of *counting-writing* and Proust’s concept of time, describing this as “floating

¹⁶³ Carl, *Afterthought*, 52.

layers, loops and twisted axes,”¹⁶⁴ that ignore the regular quantitative relations established by the Gregorian calendar form. Carl speaks of the shifting temporalities found in Proust’s writing: “with at least two tracks: the narrator’s journey through time, his gigantic act of recollection, as well as the specific temporalities within the layers of the plot.”¹⁶⁵ While she writes this in order to identify certain habits found in Darboven’s writing, there is also a sense that Darboven’s use of writing functions as an activity that splits time between the moment the viewer engages with the work and the visual realisation of her practice as a daily activity – that being the artist’s experience of reading and transcribing the writing of others. This activity of transcribing relates to the writing of numbers as a literary technique and it is here in the text that the artist’s body is manifested.

Time-frames shift in *24 Gesänge opus 14, 15 a, b 1984*, whether rendered through the artist’s process of counting-writing, or the different elements and times and spaces we engage with during our encounter with the work. We are conscious of the artist working in her time, the present moment of engaging with the image of the number-writing, and the moment when the organist reads the text as music composition. In the case of Darboven’s practice, the writing is liberated by a lack of synthesising elements, both in terms of her writing practice and her choices and placement of found objects and imagery. The work is realised by the viewer’s presence and engagement as he or she attempts to read. As with the writing of Hélène Cixous, we as the reader realise the artist’s otherness through our own engagement, and therefore perhaps our own otherness, but we also become the writer as well as the reader. We attempt to find meaning in the ‘text’ as part of the experience of engaging with the art object.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid, 49.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid, 48–49. The author says there is evidence of Darboven referencing Marcel Proust, but knowing she was inspired by Henri Bergson, who was a major influence on Proust’s thinking and writing may be an interesting point of departure.

The numerical prose in *24 Gesänge opus 14, 15 a, b 1984* represents an idea of writing, a visual and highly vivid system that encourages one to listen to the sound of the organ, regardless of an attempt to separate this from the visual object. However, the music does draw us back to the image of the numbers. Darboven returns the specificity of numbers as a language of sorts, as well as questions regarding their meaning, back to their own image, and in doing so, makes the language all the more unfamiliar. Darboven presents a space that creates the opportunity for thinking about what it is to look and engage in a visual experience, but also to think about what it means to make something ‘present-at-hand.’

As a writer one moves towards the last line, to the conclusion of a final sentence; there is a performance in writing, an action, a gesture of the body in the motion of being. Darboven identifies these associations with activity through an art practice that can best be thought of in terms of an attempt to present an act of describing, of presenting information. However the artist refuses any answers or clues with regard to intention or meaning.

Ultimately, this activity could conversely be described as a simple activity of writing, of transcribing the text: simply an application of a method. For as the artist once said:

The assertion that people don’t understand my work is unbelievable and intolerant. ... My work isn’t comprehensible data-processing in the sense of our computer age, but rather it begins with $2=1,2$. We all depend on this simple mathematical system.¹⁶⁶

On encountering Darboven’s work then, one senses the moments of artistic action, of the artist almost present, for there is immediacy found in the meticulous action of writing numbers. And so as a viewer, the engagement can be one of thinking about her method as a way of thinking about art through the practice of writing.

¹⁶⁶ Carl, *Afterthought*, 46. See author’s footnote.

Darboven and the practice of writing

The metaphor is a rhetorical trope, representing the second object, or subject, as similar to the first. The allegory, meanwhile, is a representation of comparisons; in its literary form, it contains longer passages of comparisons, symbolically substituted for something else. While the metaphor is secondary to the main event, the allegory reveals a hidden meaning. Thinking in terms of art, the allegory can be thought of in terms of symbolism, as found in paintings from the late 19th century by artists such as Mallarmé and Rimbaud, for example. The metaphor, meanwhile, came into use for the Surrealist artists who used familiar places and objects to stand in for a broader range of ideas and associations (an example being the forest, often used by artists such as Max Ernst as a symbol for the imagination.)

As one can identify from my discussion of Gerhard Richter's paintings and Georges Didi-Huberman's discussion of the images from Auschwitz, the metaphor is a popular trope in a contemporary reading of the visual, whether or not we accept it as an art object. However, the use of such literary terms with reference to art can be problematic, for it supposes subservience to another object or subject that moves our experience from that work of art. When reading interpretations of Darboven's practice, one finds that the allegory is often referenced, as though her attempt to record and write with words, numbers, and signs references a more in-depth narrative, somehow *beyond* language, and in fact refers back to a more visual or aural experience outside of the context of the immediate encounter.¹⁶⁷

Vanessa Place sets out a method for thinking about Darboven's work in terms of the allegory. Darboven said that she preferred to see her work in book form and therefore,

¹⁶⁷ See for example: Vanessa Place, "The Allegory and the Archive," *Conceptual Writing 101*, October 16, 2010.

http://conceptualwriting101.blogspot.co.uk/2010/10/allegory-and-archive-vanessa-place_16.html [Accessed 8th May 2014].

one might assume that her panels are supposed to be *read*.¹⁶⁸ It stands to reason, then, that Darboven's practice has been described as the allegorisation of literature and history, with the parts of her work being described as "a cluster of fragments clutched in a futile attempt at (re)unification."¹⁶⁹ Place describes Darboven's technique as similar to that of Gertrude Stein for it contains moments of "repetition ... never repeating, but accumulating, emphasising, analogizing, allegorizing."¹⁷⁰ She believes that Darboven's writing practice is closest to Walter Benjamin and specifically identifies *Passagenwerk* (*Arcades Project*), identifying Benjamin as a "culture worker" and his collection of quotations and ideas as an "exegesis of reproduction and an aesthete's refutation of fungibility, and was itself a failure to synthesize, the failure of writing to write."¹⁷¹ Place sees Darboven's activity as surpassing Benjamin, believing that her failure to synthesise is in fact intentionally synthesised; that the writing is itself, synthetic, thus, "Darboven's allegories are themselves allegorical. The answer thus becomes-allegorical *of*: the message is in the medium."¹⁷² For Benjamin, the allegory coexisted between the image and the script, the visual and the verbal, as a narrative that becomes readable when translated into an allegorical mode.¹⁷³ The allegorical is the symbolic representation of abstract ideas or principles by an alternative form that does not necessarily have to be literary; yet, Darboven places her

¹⁶⁸ Vanessa Place, "Hanne Darboven," *X.TRA* 14, no. 1 (Fall 2011), line.org/article/hanne-darboven/ [Accessed May 20 2014].

¹⁶⁹ Vanessa Place, "Hanne Darboven," *X.TRA* 14, no. 1 (Fall 2011), line.org/article/hanne-darboven/. See reference to Brigid Doherty, "Hanne Darboven's 'Real Writing' of History," *Hanne Darboven: Menschen und Landschaften* (Schaffhausen: Hallen Fur neue Kunst, 1999) and Dan Adler, *Hanne Darboven: Cultural History 1880-1983* (London: Afterall Books, 2009)

¹⁷⁰ Place, "Hanne Darboven."

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁷² *Ibid.*

¹⁷³ Azade Seyhan, in Beate Allert et al., *Languages of Visuality: Crossings between Science, Art, Politics, and Literature* (Detroit, Wayne State University Press, 1996), 229–230.

viewer in a space that contains literary moments that are embedded in art. The writing becomes part of the material result of the artist's making and thinking process, as do the other elements we find in the work. Therefore, defining what is material and what is method becomes part of the experience of interpretation, and the possibility of identifying allegorical narrative.

Time as material

Spatial and material elements found in Darboven's practice relate to themes that return throughout this research, for instance memory and the passing of time. This effects a methodology for thinking about the universal and specific experience of art and how one can engage with the artwork, while resisting the default to interpretations found in textbooks and exhibition catalogues, for example.

During the 1970s Darboven was exploring ideas around number translation, whereby she created a system using the numbers found in the calendar, turning dates into numerical formulae. She would then repeat, transform and write these numbers out again, resulting in works such as *One Century and One Year*, 1971, which consisted of 365 binders containing a series of numbers extrapolated from a single date and grouped with other volumes to represent months, years of the century from January 1 1900 – December 31 1999. For each month she created 28 to 31 books, each book containing 100 pages except for Feb 29, which consisted 25 pages. As a result, *time* becomes the primary and essential structure: that being the *actual* time of the artist's 'labour' and an *abstracted* time experienced by the viewer.¹⁷⁴ We recognise the artist working through a desire to act out these formulae, with the flow of this

¹⁷⁴ Benjamin Lima, "Analogies, Archives and Atlases: Hanne Darboven and Cyprien Gaillard" (McKinney Avenue Contemporary, Dallas, October 12, 2012), <http://artthisweek.com/?p=1156>. Quoting Lynn Cook.

conscientiousness notated and translated into numbers, curves and mixed notations familiar to her practice.

The calendar creates a structure for the passing of time, thus a sense of the here and now, a personal and communal relationship with the past and the not-here-yet. By taking the traditional calendar format and using it as a “working tool,”¹⁷⁵ the artist compacts what might be termed “trivial data” into new serial orders. Grande describes this as an activity that seems to “erase the very traces of the past” from the origin, going on to describe Darboven’s work as a “minimalist biography.”¹⁷⁶ However, one could ask, at what point do we find the biography, for surely the work is only representative of a structuring of time? It is only when we place an authoritative voice – that being the art historian’s or indeed, our own – that we can relate this method back to the artist’s life. We find the activity of making, but no defining resolution of a single narrative of her life.

Writing about Darboven in 1983, a year before *24 Gesänge opus 14, 15 a, b 1984*, Annelie Pohlen wrote that time is an “intangible measure for the totality of the indices determining being; it is the content of consciousness; it exists beyond human comprehension.” In contrast to this, one can argue that by making time a strong component – a material even – of her practice, the artist makes it concrete. In addition, she allows the viewer to engage with her practice, as the work is visual evidence of time spent and so it allows the viewer to spend time with the object itself. Authored histories and personal memories become the material through which one can experience the visual remains of the artist’s activity of work.

As I set out in the introduction, the conventional use of a linear perspective provided a sense of orientation and stability for the viewer. As Hito Steyerl explains, it also introduced the notion of linear time, which allows mathematical prediction, and

¹⁷⁵ Grande, “Hanne Darboven: Writing Time”, 30.

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 30.

therefore a sense of linear progress. It provided a convention by which artists traditionally created the illusion of depth and distance, background and foreground, in artworks by working to a line of horizon.¹⁷⁷ As Steyerl explains, linear perspective assumes a standing observer on stable ground, looking towards an (in fact) artificial horizon. Time, like space, can suddenly seem unstable, empty even when the horizon line disappears.¹⁷⁸ When considering Darboven's practice, one might consider this grasping of time. Her work creates different approaches to how we navigate time and our bodies in space. Her activity of making acts as a mode of positioning herself to then remove herself in an ever-continuing and ever-moving world. This is the world that exists through ever developing technologies of visual communication techniques that shift our sense of perspective and therefore our own contemporary spatial and temporal orientation in time and space. As the artist becomes present and then absent in the experience of her practice, we become conscious of our presence in the moment of engagement, to then become absent after.

Seen and unseen

Emmanuel Levinas recognises that memory, in its positive state, resides in the negative, for he believes it to be the very production of one's interiority. Edward Casey explains that for Levinas, memory "recaptures and reverses and suspends," thus assuming the passivity of the past.¹⁷⁹ Time, therefore, is represented in the moments we suspend and keep in our memory, which affects the methods by which we choose to engage with our present. Furthermore, Levinas claims that our imagination

¹⁷⁷ Steyerl, *The Wretched of the Screen*, 18–19.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid., 19. See author's reference to Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," in *Illuminations* (Schocken Books, 1969)

¹⁷⁹ Edward Casey, "Levinas on Memory and the Trace", in *The Collegium Phaenomenologicum, The First Ten Years*, John C. Sallis, Giuseppina Moneta, and Jacques Taminiaux, ed., *Phaenomenologica*, 105 (Dordrecht, Springer Netherlands, 1988), 241–55.

neutralises the gaze, and that “the real world appears as if it were between parentheses or quotation marks.” So by way of an example, the consciousness of a representation found in a painting is the knowing that the object being represented is not present.¹⁸⁰ The link between memory and the object is established, for the object stands in for memory, while suggesting that the memory is a metaphor for the event. The painting acts as representation, standing in for the object and yet, when we encounter Darboven’s work, the object – what we define as the artwork – is realised in our recognition of the absences: that being the performance of the artist’s practice and the association between the artwork and biographical interpretation. This is an example of Levinas’ key point, that presence is the knowing that absence remains. In addition, as viewers we return this absence back to our own imagination, thus associating the experience with our own experiences and engagement with the histories that can be associated with Darboven’s practice. One can see why Grande quotes Proust who described the past as beyond our intellectual reach, present in material objects that appear by chance,¹⁸¹ for the artist’s suggestion of associated histories is characterised by her refusal of clear narration. The absences in the visual aspect of the work allow the viewer to find meaning and to inform the objects found within their own stories. When writing about Fra Angelico’s fresco at San Marco, Georges Didi-Huberman writes that when one positions their gaze on an artwork, it is a matter of naming what one sees.¹⁸² Therefore, the visual is always activated in the engagement, regardless of

¹⁸⁰ Emmanuel Levinas, “Reality and Its Shadow”, in Clive Cazeaux, *The Continental Aesthetics Reader* (Oxon, Psychology Press, 2000), 121–122.

¹⁸¹ Ibid. Author references to Proust: “The past is hidden somewhere outside the realm, beyond the reach of intellect, in some material object (in the sensation which that material object will give us) of which we have no inkling. And it depends on chance whether or not we come upon this object before we ourselves must die, or whether we ever encounter it.” Marcel Proust, *In Search Of Lost Time Vol 1: Swann’s Way* (Vintage Classics, 1996), 51.

¹⁸² Didi-Huberman, *Confronting Images*, 30–31.

what that visual element might be. As discussed in the previous chapter, when attempting to describe the experience of the fresco, Georges Didi-Huberman focuses on the central *empty* space of the annunciation scene, describing it as “more *event* than a painted object,” as being “irrefutable and paradoxical.” Didi-Huberman describes the efficacy in the image and the phenomenon of something that refuses to appear clearly or distinctly. The absence might be the state of incompleteness, but in order to sustain religious narratives we imagine the absence as emblematic of an intention by its author: an elsewhere that our imagination might choose or choose not to seek.¹⁸³

Darboven’s work provides a model for how we might relate to intended visual absences as an act of displacement rather than the transcendence hoped for in experiencing the fresco. We can instead find ways to prove that everything can be related back to a use of language, for when the artist constructs an artwork through numbers and a selection of christening cards, there are associations to be made that occur in language. These objects stand in for the absences that the viewer may or may not choose to re-instate in the experience. Furthermore, I would argue that these absences are not all visual, but instead are conceptual elements that can be considered in language and through ideas outside of traditional art theory.

The image of *24 Gesänge opus 14, 15 a, b 1984* is, in the words of Didi-Huberman, *vivid* and *an event*. The absences are the spaces between the image of the artwork and the sound of the organ, spaces between reading numbers and the building of a structure where the traces of the artist’s performance of making remain. The codes and structures of this writing are not decipherable in a linguistic or dialectical sense. The numerical signs take on an object-hood of their own, separated from their usual space for analogy yet somehow related to a language form that is at once explicit and complicit with the viewer, yet at the same time refusing a clear and limited

¹⁸³ Ibid, 17–18.

interpretation. In a sense, Darboven banishes any expectation of language in this refusal and at the same time provokes a re-evaluation of language as that associated with music and numbers per se.

Darboven's musical scores continue to relate to a notion of timing, but in this instance, to events separate to her daily life: thus the artist is further removed from the viewer's engagement with the work of art. The result is far from minimal, for the experience of the encounter also contains possibilities found in the played music. In the very absence of imagery in the traditional sense, one gains an alternative visual language that activates a sense of timing in both music and in the artist's daily practice through the expression of writing numbers. Thus, an alternative visual language is rendered through the activity of making and the activity of engaging as a viewer.

The archive and writing

There are several strands within Darboven's practice that overlap when presented in the final artworks. The artist appears to source ideas and materials from daily life, more as a social magpie than an anthropologist, for there is no sense of specific intellectual purpose to her choice of gathered objects. However, what does remain is a sense of consistency, for example, the volume of christening cards collected suggests intention and commitment to her project. Meanwhile the notations she writes create an impression of meaning if only through a consistency of activity rather than an idea of actual content or an association outside of itself. There is the sense of the archivist's work: collecting and recording with personalised notations, thus documenting the passing of time to find meaning and association. Artist Petra Feriancova has written on collecting as an artistic practice, describing the hoarding person as someone needing to accumulate objects and memories, in order to gain a sense of self-realisation. Feriancova writes that the "relocation, re-selection or postproduction of an archive or a

collection is just an author's vision of a new organization of the world, universe or history." ¹⁸⁴

Whether it is the result of official collecting or an activity of *hoarding* (which is maybe an undisciplined, compulsive pursuit), the nature of the archive is determined by the authorship of the activity. Darboven's collection of christening cards and her choice to place them into the context of the musical scores found in *24 Gesänge opus 14, 15 a, b 1984* means that the cards seem to behave less formally than the objects in *Bismarckzeit 1978*, (*Bismarck era 1978*), and *Kulturgeschichte 1880–1983 (Cultural History 1880–1983)* (images 31, 32, and 33), for example. The christening cards might seem redundant, of private interest to the families, as is often the case with a personal archive. The artist reveals part of her personal archive, which as with any personal collection, must relate back to a private pursuit that reflects personal self-expectation. By placing the cards in this context the artist adds an element of incomprehensibility at the point at which she reveals a personal pursuit. She reminds us that the official narrative that the outsider (the historian for example) finds within another's personal archive is one determined before work on the archive takes place. By reflecting on the archive in relation to Darboven's practice, time again becomes material and all ideas associated to known and unknown histories dissolve in the experience of her work.

Being *in* the archive one experiences a sense of time being negated; of making progress by being out of step with *real* time outside the archive. A collection presents the results from time spent gathering and recording, of a time used to create alternative and associated histories. This sense of time passing relates to Darboven's number-writing and therefore provides a method with which to think of the archive in relation to her writing practice. As a writer, the artist creates an alternative history, for she

¹⁸⁴ Petra Feriancova, "Petra Feriancova: Archive and Collection".

[Http://www.petraferiancova.com](http://www.petraferiancova.com), 2012,

<http://www.petraferiancova.com/text/feriancova-petra-archive-and-collection-2012>

[Accessed 9th, May 2014].

plays on the value of meaning, of processes and ordering, of categorising, on an activity of presenting a concept without necessarily explaining her motivation. Therefore the activity of time keeping and recording daily activity creates a collection of sorts. And while she presents the activity of an archivist and a writer, this becomes manifest through the multiple gestures of the artist found in the result of an activity of making.

Archive and art practice

When speaking on the archive, with reference to the collection at the Freud Museum in London, Jacques Derrida describes the collection as providing *impressions* rather than any concluding *concept*. Derrida explains that the term ‘archive’ is only a *notion*, “an impression associated with a word,” for we only have “an impression, an insistent impression through the unstable feeling of a shifting figure, of a schema, or of an infinite or indefinite process.”¹⁸⁵ In making this claim Derrida gives the archive purpose in its contemporary context, for he allows multiple narratives to be associated to a recognised and established collection, thus activating the idea of new engagement with recognised histories already placed on the objects found at the museum.

In this same essay, Derrida presents a theory of the archive by deconstructing the route of the word. Speaking of *Arkhé*, meaning *Commencement* and *Commandment*, he writes that the name coordinates two principles in one: “the principle according to nature or history, there where things *commence* – physical, historical, or ontological principle” and “the principle according to the law.” Within this description, Derrida recognises his use of the word “*there*” and his determination of a “*place*.” He writes: “*There*, we said, and *in this place*. How are we to think of *there*? And this *taking place*

¹⁸⁵ Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1998), 29.

or this *having a place of the Arkhé.*”¹⁸⁶ The term ‘archive’ derives from the word *arkheion*, meaning the house of the *archon* (the magistrates), which also provides the word *archontic*, meaning a physical, real or factual existence of any particular thing, regardless of it being tangible or intangible. Therefore the archive separates and shelters material as part of a collection.

The archive is much discussed in art theory. For example at the conference titled, ‘Out of the Archive: Artists, Images and History’ at Tate Modern,¹⁸⁷, much of the discussion centred on the artist’s engagement with collections, sometimes acting as a critique on traditional methods for thinking about the archive, while also presenting ways in which the artist might offer new ideas on how to engage with archival objects and documentation. Through practice, the artist can offer thoughts on the potential of new narratives and activate fresh engagement with collections. The discussion recognised the layers of descriptive narrative associated with the archive, which often leads to a method of a *literal* cause and affect activity on the part of the archivist, rather than finding new forms of criticality by looking at the potential, especially when thinking about the less obviously *useful* archive objects. By creating counter-archives, the artist creates alternative ways to look at history, forming new methods for engaging, and therefore writing the past and relating our present moment to the lives of previous generations.

Darboven’s collection of objects encourages a consideration of the archive in relation to an artist’s practice. When considering how the artist thinks through the activity of

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 1.

¹⁸⁷ *Out of the Archives: Artists, Images and History*, Weblink (Tate Modern, London, 18-19th November, 2011), <http://www.tate.org.uk/context-comment/audio/out-of-the-archives-artists-images-and-history-day-1>. Contributors include: Sven Augustijnen, Frédérique Berthet, Adam Broomberg, Bernadette Buckley, Filipa César, Oliver Chanarin, TJ Demos, Mary Ann Doane, Nanina Guyer, Mark Nash, Colin MacCabe, Naeem Mohaiemen, Laura Mulvey, Michael Renov, Zineb Sedira, Louise Sheedy, Patrik Sjöberg and Chou Yu-Ling.

making, we can recognise the way the artist selects and positions objects to create new content within and beyond the context the objects were found in. This is in line with Derrida's activity as thinker and writer in response to the archive. Thinking of the archive in terms of *impressions* allows for ideas associated to objects to shift. And thus, it allows us to appreciate the potential of the artist's activity to create new ways of thinking about historical and recent events through making.

There are many examples of contemporary artists using their practice to react to lost or under-represented archives, engaging an encounter that provides new narratives associated with forgotten memories. For example, in the installation titled *The Classic Mob Ballet* at MAK, Vienna, Benjamin Hirte reacted to the specific conditions and form of presentation discovered in the collection. He created poetic and humorous stagings that allowed ideas to be perceived from a subjective vantage point, creating a blurring of the boundaries between museum exhibition practice and an artist's narration, repositioning functional display, archived objects and the artist's made objects. Petra Feriancova works through personal archives of her own and those of others through different technologies and stagings, thus expanding the archive to become the artwork. The viewer is placed at the centre and at the periphery, and is thus rendered at once complicit and outside, and while there is a strange logic to the proceedings, it is hard to articulate the experience. Through her practice the artist proves that the past is imprecise and evasive, slipping between private and public experiences and associations. Thinking in terms of new ideas of storytelling as found in archives, one can look at artist Zbyněk Baladrán, whose works are made up of found or donated historical film fragments, protest slogans in the aftermath of street demonstrations, diagrams, texts and images from old publications, placed alongside his philosophical musings. The artist creates a new way of activating the past and turning images into text as well as activating philosophical ideas within a contemporary context.

When Darboven imitates the gesture of the archivist, the artist “exposes the act, the gesture of empowerment underlying the archivist’s proceedings,”¹⁸⁸ for no body of knowledge is generated in the traditional sense, even if they seem to present evidence in a form that has the appearance of “posedly meaningful” information. However, thinking of Darboven’s practice through an engagement with contemporary art practice, one is able to recognise different approaches to thinking about her work. One can consider her practice in relation to contemporary art practice, for she too, like Hirte, blurs the boundaries between museum display and an artist’s narration, selecting objects and placing them as if in a functional exhibition display of archived objects. Her works slip between the private and public so that, as in Feriancova’s work, the past becomes evasive and imprecise, very much like the artist herself. Meanwhile, her writing practice adds a literary content that, instead of turning images into text, as in the work of Baladrán, turns the text into image. These images of text act like poetry, for the potential of the interpretation is left to the viewer/reader.

While the image of the christening cards in *24 Gesänge opus 14, 15 a, b 1984* might point towards a number of cultural references, these objects also complicate the engagement. The repetition of the cards acts as ephemeral reminders from a particular contextual past, but the concept of this is obscured when the eye returns to the number-writing. These little pieces of paper do indeed form an *impression*, but there is little identifiable concept beyond their material. While imagery may appear to offer a more comfortable route to contemplate the artwork, in this case it does the opposite.

In his paper titled “Analogies, Archives and Atlases: Hanne Darboven and Cyprien Gaillard”¹⁸⁹, Benjamin Lima considers the artist’s activity of collecting in light of Aby Warburg’s *Bilderatlas Mnemosyne* and Gerhard Richter *Atlas* works. Warburg and

¹⁸⁸ Carl, *Afterthought*, 58.

¹⁸⁹ Lima, “Analogies, Archives and Atlases: Hanne Darboven and Cyprien Gaillard.”

Richter created on-going inclusionary process pieces; objects associated only by the act of being contained together for a period of time. Their pieces function as archives of found images, placed together into structures that attempt a shift of former categorisation. Therefore, as with the artworks created by contemporary artists, their projects reconfigure visual history, creating alternative propositions in order to understand the past.

Benjamin Lima explains that Richter's Atlas is a "memory aid, a method of working technique, and a source for further constructed efforts." It functions as a collection of images to create paintings, providing a "principle of equivalency." Benjamin Buchloh describes this collection as an 'anomic archive', for it lacks a motivating power. Rather than expect the viewer to distinguish its parts, with all images placed on one level, it functions as a reflection of the image culture in which the artist finds himself. Furthermore, as Lima explains, Warburg and Richter's archives maintain a layer below the level of artistic creativity, for neither individual recognised their atlas as a final artwork. Conversely, Darboven's finished objects are contained and finished structures, and it is the problem of understanding how these structures and the numbers within them function as part of the whole that defines these objects as works of art.

As with Richter, with Darboven's work one can identify the challenge of placing one's life within the context of a greater historical narrative, that being the specifically German narrative at the centre of the discussion surrounding works such as Darboven's *Bismarckzeit 1978*, (*Bismarck era 1978*), and *Kulturgeschichte 1880–1983* (*Cultural History 1880–1983*). In *Bismarckzeit 1978* the artist takes the well-known character from German history, Otto Von Bismarck, as the starting point for interpretation. She plays out a similar activity to Warburg and Richter by collecting, but in doing so creates what Lima describes as "a collapse of confidence in a kind of

positivist capture of history.”¹⁹⁰ Meanwhile in *Kulturgeschichte 1880–1983*, which arbitrarily begins in 1880 and contains 1,590 sheets and 19 sculptural works, the artist appears to be suppressing bigger cultural themes in our recollection by placing them with other varied and homogenised references without attempting to form a coherent *meta-narrative*.¹⁹¹

Lima points out the difficulty with encountering such works by contemporary German artists without reflecting on “the impossibility of reconstructing a sense of national history or sense of national identity after the catastrophe that was National Socialism.” But conversely, this thought process is representative of how the art historian references the artist’s biography in order to interpret their works of art. Instead one might consider Darboven’s archiving practice as making use of material universally available, associated to historical events only by narratives placed on them. By reflecting on the activity of contemporary artists I have mentioned above, and by thinking about the archive in terms of providing the source material for the activity of thinking through making, one can rethink Darboven’s practice in terms of it functioning within a wider social engagement with the act of collecting. And further, what it means for us as viewers to revisit history through these new narratives in art form.

Darboven’s practice engages her viewer with the historical narratives, fighting against collective amnesia, while making us conscious of time present and time passed. Her works present what Aby Warburg described as “the survival of the antique”, and what Lima calls an “after-life” of memory, where individual memories are found through larger historical moments.¹⁹² By refusing to present something ‘meaningful’, the artist

¹⁹⁰ Ibid.

¹⁹¹ Ibid.

¹⁹² Dan Adler, *Hanne Darboven: Cultural History 1880-1983* (London, MIT Press, 2009), 5–6. Dan Adler claims that Cultural History presents such a potential for intuitive connections and that each part of the installation should be treated with the

makes the archive a private activity that the viewer can only partly share in. She thus gives the viewer an opportunity to question the universal and the moments of specific experience and memory, which is where the assumption of interpretation falters.

By reflecting on *24 Gesänge opus 14, 15 a, b 1984*, where the artist includes a form of writing, we can consider a broader set of visual and non-visual reference points during the encounter with the artwork. While writing is often considered an independent and personal pursuit, therefore particular in action, Darboven presents a method for considering the universal activity of collecting as a similar pursuit, as a way that relates to our particular need for “self-realization.”¹⁹³

Hanne Darboven gives the impression of the archive contained and complete in objecthood, but her works are unending in their lack of realistic and tangible evidence. Darboven’s collecting activity points to the past, while her writing method has a present-ness in its resistance to her private thoughts. Furthermore, there are few moments when one is able to recognise the “consigned memory” that Derrida speaks of, and so there is no “faithfulness to tradition.” This is mainly because the tradition that we are negotiating is unclear: could it be that of the artist, or that of our cultural history? If it is the latter, whose cultural history should we be assessing?¹⁹⁴ If we attempt to interpret the artist’s work in response to her biography, we are likely to forget that our own biography remains present throughout the interpretation, thus cutting us off from the potential of our *being* performed as a method of remaining present and actively engaging with the artwork.

same attention and relevance to the experience as a whole. However, he also understands the work as refusing to answer a call for "interpretative synthesis."

¹⁹³ Petra Feriancova, “Feriencova, Petra: Archive and Collection”,

[Http://www.petraferiancova.com](http://www.petraferiancova.com), 2012,

<http://www.petraferiancova.com/text/feriancova-petra-archive-and-collection-2012>

[Accessed 30th May 2014].

¹⁹⁴ Derrida, *Archive Fever*, 33–34.

Phenomenology and the writtenness

Phenomenology considers the structures of consciousness as experienced from a particular, personal point of view. In our “consciousness of something,” phenomenology “sets out to re-describe appearances.”¹⁹⁵ And it is writing, as Cazeaux claims, that is the application of concepts to experience. The experience of Darboven’s number-writing returns the viewer back to personal specific experience, for while there may be nothing that can obviously translate into a literary language, our engagement reminds us that there still is something in its very material form. Furthermore, the relationship of this to the christening cards and the music playing, allows our consciousness to drift beyond the artwork, only to then come back to an attempt to *read* that renders the numbers as abstract signs, complete and constant. Darboven creates a scenario for reading where two or more people can share the experience, while there are contained moments when one feels more or less confused in an attempt at interpretation. An ease with the inability to fully engage with the artist’s intention creates a sense of one’s own consciousness in the moment of *reading*. This presents a scenario akin to reading Cixous, at moments in particular when one becomes uncertain of whether the narrative provides a fiction or a biographical *truth*. Darboven’s ‘language’ creates a sense of a shifting of time and space that is similar to the shifting that one experiences when reading Cixous’s writing. By reading her thoughts on writing, one is able to think further about the gesture of the artist in the space of encountering the work.

Phenomenology brings the body into the experience, while Cixous would claim that the body is always in the text and that when she reads or writes, it is a single ‘gesture’ and part of a continuous chain of literature.¹⁹⁶ Reading is punctuated by the living

¹⁹⁵ Clive Cazeaux, *The Continental Aesthetics Reader* (Psychology Press, 2000), 311.

¹⁹⁶ Marta Segarra, “Hélène Cixous: Writing and Dreaming the Feminine”, *The Portable Cixous*, 23.

experience of literature that is informed by the rate at which time flows, and the speed at which we gather information. The experience of reading activates our personal experience as much as a universal understanding, therefore our instinctual response as much as an intellectual engagement.

This emotional experience of reading and interpretation relates to our experience of art in the gallery, in books, and on the Internet. As contemporary viewers, our direct experience with the artwork is activated by snippets from other experiences or an exchange of imagery and information aside from a direct engagement with art. And while Darboven's work seems dry and impenetrable in books or on the computer screen, when the viewer encounters these works in person, the experience becomes that of participation by attending to reading. The shifting, culminating experience of these artworks by the sheer possibility of knowledge that can be associated with the artist's practice removes us from the actual engagement with art and then brings us back.

When Darboven describes numbers as a way of "writing without explaining" she is not limiting their potential for interpretation, but merely stating that they function on her behalf, to then become a text that lacks straightforward description. For the artist, numbers are concrete and describable, forming a language that can change and shift yet always returns to the same quantity of itself. The layers of references beside the numbers allow the viewer to shift between spaces, between the world of art and the interpretative imperative that is often associated with the archive. As a viewer, we are complicit with a universal numbering system, and yet slide between the here, the now and the then. Through an attempt to engage with the work as a whole, absences become discernible, as does the impossibility of containing one fixed, true idea of the artwork.

One could claim that with the attempt to write about an artwork that contains a linguistically literary element, there is a danger that the object of the artwork is

obscured. The result of this is to neglect a reading, to look outside and beyond the artwork rather than to return the eye back to the work itself. But thinking in terms of my own writing practice in relation to artworks, I recognise the notion of writing to feel engaged in an activity, to activate oneself in an attempt to engage with the event removed from the self and to place it down into writing. And while I am confronted with the expectations I have by default of my personal and collective history and culture, it is at this point that the artwork becomes interesting as a visual and non-visual object. As readers we can relate this to testing the moments of encounter, the “double-rhythm” of looking and writing, between thinking and understanding and thinking and interpretation, the sense of the seeing and not-yet seeing, and how we might consider this in the experience of Darboven’s practice in relation to the experience of art.

New methods for reading and interpretation

Much has been written on the association between the emphasis on the word and the engagement of sound in Judaic tradition and how the influence of this can be found in contemporary philosophical writing and literary criticism.

Charting the influence of Jewish thinking on contemporary philosophy and literary theory and ideas, Susan A. Handelman reminds her reader that in Judaism, language and thought are intricately interrelated, and that words have their own independent cognitive function.¹⁹⁷ In Judaism the Biblical text points inwards to its network of relations, to the “verbal and temporal ambiguities” in written language. This calls for decipherment that does not involve a movement away from the text towards vision or abstraction, but instead one listens or reads more intently.¹⁹⁸ She presents Erich

¹⁹⁷ Ibid., 5.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid, 31.

Auerbach's essay "Odysseus's Scar"¹⁹⁹ to contrast this form of reading with the Homeric (Greek) tradition. Homer's *Odyssey*, she explains, presents every aspect of the story in the foreground as "fully illuminated, externalised form" narrative, while by contrast in Biblical stories everything is "indeterminate and contingent." In the Biblical stories, time and space are undetermined, while the protagonist's motives are unexpressed: "only what is minimally necessary for the narrative to proceed is externalised while the rest is left in obscurity."²⁰⁰ The story is "fragmentary," "full of lacunae," for speech here "conceals as much as externalises for the narrative is entangled in layers of history, not at all entirely immersed in the present." Therefore, one recognises that the text functions differently depending on the reader, for if the reading takes place in the present, interpretation will relate to the immediate and contemporary surroundings.

Different methods for story writing affect our engagement with the writing process. When looking at Darboven's work, the narrative we attempt to engage with is entangled in the present as much as the layers of history that make up the work in relation to the artist herself. The author, the artist, becomes the protagonist, as we attempt to work out the motivating factors within her work. Meanwhile time and space are undetermined, for both shift as the reader attempts to read. One could argue that the same happens as when engaging with the Biblical text in Judaism – the artist's activity becomes an event through the viewer's engagement with the artwork in the present.

For the Ancient Greeks, language provided the vocal imitation of the object, while the use of language in writing (as well as in speech) was considered forever contingent to

¹⁹⁹ Erich Auerbach and Edward W. Said, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (Princeton, Oxford, Princeton University Press, 2013).

²⁰⁰ Susan A. Handelman, *Slayers of Moses: The Emergence of Rabbinic Interpretation in Modern Literary Theory* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1983), 31. Handelman presents the Sacrifice of Isaac as example.

this and therefore, imperfect. According to Plato, correct thinking followed connections between certain forms and so the sentence only became true by the arrangement of its parts. A mathematical language, abstracted from the object, was thought to provide the true knowledge of reality; numbers, not words, accessed the truth.²⁰¹ Handelman explains that this is paramount to understanding the break between Rabbinic and Greek thought and furthermore, key to the determination of the concepts of truth, meaning, and interpretation in Western thought today.²⁰²

When studying the ancient Hebrew script in Judaism, the translation of each word is key to the process of interpreting a passage, often providing more than one possible interpretation. So, for example, in Greek, the term *onoma* means ‘name’, while in Hebrew the term *davar*, means ‘word’ and ‘thing.’ The ambiguous and yet no less specific term in Hebrew has a conceptually different meaning from the term *onoma*, thus before interpretation in Judaism begins, the meaning of *davar* is undetermined and abstract. It is the circumstance and the words surrounding it that create the sense of its use within context. This original unity of *word* and *thing* (of speech and thought/discourse and truth) is, according to Handelman, the place at which the subsequent history of Western thought about language can be determined.²⁰³

Moving from this to the mathematic prose found in *24 Gesänge opus 14, 15 a, b 1984*, one might suppose an invitation or request to add and subtract, to create an interpretation that relates to a musical note or a language created by certain formulae. There is a circulatory nature created through the repetition of these numerical *signs* that seems to present answers to the sense of purpose. And yet, the answer(s) still remains unfounded. The facility of sight is set into motion, perhaps even tested as a method by which to gain appreciation of creative practice, for the numbers represent

²⁰¹ Ibid, 4–5.

²⁰² Ibid, 5–6.

²⁰³ Ibid, 3–4.

the activity of the artist while they also become images, and part of the larger image of the overall artwork. Potentially our sight acts as a way of engaging with knowledge brought to the encounter with the artwork, for it is a matter of seeing the work as a whole and, if we allow ourselves to, it is a matter of breaking the parts down and attempting to formulate a kind of reading.

At the time of her first visit to New York in 1964, Darboven was producing white boards covered with dots and large graph paper works covered with words, numbers, dots and geometrical lines. During this time, she began to develop her *Konstruktionen* comprising a neutral language of numbers in linear construction using pen, pencil, typewriter, and graph paper. For the artist, numbers represented a universal language that allowed her to mark the passing of time. Lists of numbers resulted from additions and multiplications of personally derived numerical sequences based on the four to six digits used to notate days, months and years of the standard Gregorian calendar.²⁰⁴ Her daily and disciplined practice was formed by handwriting “daily arithmetic”, with checksums replacing the calendric progression according to mathematical logic, comprising ascending and descending numbers and line notations. Tryn Collins believes that this activity was not fuelled by a kind of personal pathos, but rather “a steadfast, continuous, seemingly unstoppable application of her inner logic to create *Schreibzeit*— ‘writing time.’”²⁰⁵

²⁰⁴ See Guggenheim Collection website: For *Ein Jahrhundert (A Century)* (1971–75), Darboven visualized the hundred-year span through numbers. She represented each day and year starting with the number 00 and ending with 99. Additions were made in 1982 to honour the 150th anniversary of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s death.

[Http://www.guggenheim.org/new-york/collections/collection-online/artists/bios/896?tmpl=component&print=1](http://www.guggenheim.org/new-york/collections/collection-online/artists/bios/896?tmpl=component&print=1). [Accessed 2nd June 2014].

²⁰⁵ Tryn Collins, “Notations: The Cage Effect Today”, Hunter College Art Galleries, New York, 2012. Temporary article to accompany exhibition <<http://www.notationsthecageeffecttoday.org/the-artists/hanne-darboven/>> [Accessed January 2014], <http://www.minusspace.com/2012/02/notations-the-cage-effect-today-hunter-college-art-galleries-new-york-ny/> [Accessed 30th May 2014]

24 Gesänge opus 14, 15 a, b 1984 appears visually less complex in form and structure than other works by the artist at this time. There is pattern and repetition and a clear line between the activity of writing and creating a musical composition that has been interpreted by the organist. But this is the paradox, for the artist allows the viewer to choose a method for engagement and in doing so allows a level of interpretation that comes from outside the familiar experience of viewing an artwork, and it is here that the work becomes complicated.

The numbers take on a visual element, creating a rich landscape of numerical form that seems to replace an idea of the image expected in traditional forms of art. If we are to take the *Greek approach* as our starting point, then we are left looking for ways of devising strategies for interpreting the artist's intention, creating formulae that lead to a sense of *meaning*. However, by looking at these numbers as having multiple possibilities, as visual objects, representative of *Schreibzeit*— 'writing time,' of marking the passing of time, as well as acting as music composition, we are able to signpost moments where breaks occur in the traditions of interpretation in art, and also in logical expectations outside of art. Darboven's seemingly ordered and restrained activities contain imperfections, either in the scribbled non-numerical forms, or the anecdotal nature of the christening cards, that allow an escape from the literal. These are the occurrences that one would expect from an artist engaged in the activity of writing, whose physical absence allows the viewer to engage their imagination. Her practice offers the potential for intuitive connections, where reading becomes a matter of engaging with differing rhythms. The reader's act is always shifting back to the artist's performance of writing, while finding references beyond the space of encounter, where information outside the artwork is activated through the absences in direct experience.

Art practice and literary history

The conceptual framework found in this artwork takes us to the formal level of post-WWII Minimalism, as identified in Bochner's essay above, which recognised art, literature and music stripped of expressive tendencies. This was a movement that could be described as a formal reaction to recent history, recognised as a way of removing the individual personality of its maker from the creative process. Darboven, and many of her contemporaries, lived in the spaces of this trauma, reacting to it, or in spite of it, through their own practices.

Samuel Beckett presents a literary model of this period that offers another approach to thinking about Darboven's activity as an artist. By considering the reaction of a writer based in Europe and active after WWII in relation to an artist working in Europe at this time, I believe that one can open dialogue on the spaces between collective and personal thinking and how one relates to this in a creative practice. We are able to consider what is present in the text, as with the visual elements that make up Darboven's practice. By imagining that there is more beyond the superficial, veneered surface of the book or the artwork, one's own critical faculty comes into play to find new potential. For the viewer/reader is engaged in recognising the presences and absences and allowing them to shift into new spaces of intellectual and emotional realisation and engagement.

I am not claiming any connection between the practices of Darboven and Beckett. However, by bringing them together I can identify the complexities attached to separating biography and art form that relate to a broader theme within this thesis – the idea of thinking through the activity of making. By attempting to consider practice separately from biography, other elements of the work can be considered as representative of a creative intention. This intention does not necessarily have to relate to the artist's or writer's immediate surrounding, but could provide a way to tap into a new way of thinking about the specific and universal experiences of that time and our

own as contemporary viewers/readers. Furthermore, the literary motif that can be recognised as running throughout all of Darboven's practice can provide a method for questioning assumptions of passive reading that is relevant to a discussion on art practice, regardless of the moment the work was created.

The idea of leaving spaces, of not-saying, can be found in contemporary literature as much as in art practice. So for example, when Jackie Blackman²⁰⁶ writes on Beckett's post-WWII works, she quotes George Steiner describing Beckett's theatre as "haunted", for "the living truth is no longer sayable."²⁰⁷ In her discussion, Blackman speaks of a "new language" being required after Auschwitz. During the years immediately after the war, the familiar language found in theatre and other art forms had become mediated and confined to a visual and textual learned vocabulary. Blackman explains, "Silent images and meaningless words became the currency of catastrophe." She goes on to write an anecdote concerning Beckett's meeting with artist Jack B. Yeats in 1945. Being asked how his works had changed over the years, Yeats replied that his paintings were now "less conscious." Blackman claims that this can be read as a "methodology for Beckett to follow in terms of abstracting the unspeakable."²⁰⁸

²⁰⁶ Dr. Jackie Blackman has written on Beckett's connections with Jewish people: her research exploring the potential realization of this found in his writing. For example, she highlights traces of Jewish context and wartime suffering in *Waiting for Godot* and other post WWII works. See "Beckett's Theatre: After Auschwitz" (cited), "Post-war Beckett: Resistance, Commitment or Communist Krap?" (In Russell Smith ed., *Beckett and Ethics*, London: Continuum, 2009.) and "Beckett Judaizing Beckett: 'a Jew from Greenland' in Paris" (*Samuel Beckett Today/Aujourd'hui* 18, Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007).

²⁰⁷ Blackman, "Beckett's Theatre After Auschwitz", in *Samuel Beckett: History, Memory, Archive* (New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 92. See author's footnote to George Steiner, "Silence and the Poet", in *Language and Silence and Other Essays* (New Haven. Yale University Press, 1998).

²⁰⁸ Blackman, *Ibid*, 74. This refers to Gordon Armstrong's conversation with Beckett in 1985.

Beckett was a contemporary witness and while in the French resistance lost many Jewish colleagues and friends. Therefore he was, at the very least, conscious of the human suffering resulting from the war. Blackman argues that from 1946, the writer had certainly developed a “less conscious” approach to his writing. Her interpretation of this, as well as her defence for approaching the writer’s work after his death in order to find reasoning for his technique, is relevant when considering how one negotiates the spaces left by Darboven. She quotes Foucault ,who describes a basis of writing as being “primarily concerned with creating an opening where the writing subject endlessly disappears,”²⁰⁹ which she believes helps the reader to consider “Beckett as writing subject – that is, the disappearance of “Beckett-the writing-subject” into ‘the-subject-of-his-writing’.”²¹⁰ I believe that when experiencing Darboven’s practice, she as an artist disappears, while her numerical language might be considered as a new, “less conscious” form of language. Her process of writing music continuously takes one back to the text found in numerical form. These works can be interpreted as creating a commonality between the sense of *not knowing* and the *unsayable*. And while, when taken at face value they can be interpreted as meaningless, they can also be seen as representative of the absences felt in the latter part of the 20th century, moving into contemporary post-war society.

Whether the artist takes on the body of the artist, the writer, the archivist, or the composer, her activity becomes manifest through the action as perceived in the encounter of the artwork. Her musical scores relate to timing, while like the christening cards, they also relate to events outside the gallery, removed from the artist. Through the presentation, one continues to attempt to identify this back to an interpretation. The codes within the writing remain indecipherable in a linguistic or

²⁰⁹ Michel Foucault and Donald F. Bouchard, *Language Counter-Memory Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, (New York, Cornell University Press, 1980), 116.

²¹⁰ Blackman, *Samuel Beckett*, 74–75.

dialectic sense, and so the numbers take on an object-hood, related to a language form of sorts at once complicit with the viewer, yet remaining somewhat untranslatable within this context. The artist's intention and thinking become further removed from the artwork and only the result of her activity remains. Thus the sense that there is an absence does not create a moment of transcendence, but rather a displacement that leads to other ways of thinking about the artwork. Given that I set out from the framework of art history, I cannot help but refer to biographical details. However, we can place less emphasis on this during attempts at interpretation, by working through the parts that make up the creative activity. We can do this by considering a broader set of references that can include specific and universal experiences outside of the engagement. By moving away from such details, we can open the discussion to a broader understanding of creative practice. The artist presents a multi-layered art installation that allows the viewer to re-instate their experiences and imagine the absences. The artist, like Beckett, becomes the subject of her work, as our attempt at interpretation moves her further away from the engagement.

Music as art practice

During the 1980s, Darboven introduced musical arrangements to her practice. By working with a collaborator, the artist took her additive concept of dates and translated them to build scores using a method in which each note was assigned a number. In basic terms, number 1 = note e, 2 = f and so forth. Compound numbers were expressed as intervals of two notes, as in 31=g-e, and the numbers combined with 0 were played as a broken chord.

Thinking in terms of Darboven's musical compositions, there is little to substantiate a claim that the composition and the performance relate to ideas outside of a process and

construction of strict formula.²¹¹ And while the compositions do relate to the strong numerical element found in traditional music arrangements, the works stem from the artist's previous processes of strict mathematical structure, based on her date concept. Tryn Collins finds similarities between the working processes of Darboven and John Cage, referencing the former's "unstoppable application of her inner logic to create *Schreibzeit* (writing time)"²¹² as a major point of this comparison. She finds the dialogue of processes based on a reduction using mathematical numbering systems another point of similarity. In 2000 such comparison were realised at the Bayerische Staatsgalerie Moderner Kunst in Munich in an exhibition of Cage's *Ryoanji* drawings (1983-92) (image 42) and Darboven's *& Tafeln, II* (1972/73).²¹³

I would, however, make the claim that Cage's approach to music composition is in fact at odds with Darboven's. Collins refers to Cage's staging of Erik Satie's *Vexations* (1893) as an example of Cage's desire to confront "the limits of his listeners' graspability", in which a short piano composition is repeated 840 times, culminating in a performance that lasts an average of eighteen hours. The listener is

²¹¹ Darboven said: "My systems are numeric concepts that work according to the laws of progression and/or reduction in the manner of a musical theme with variations."
"DARBOVEN, HANNE *1941-2009 · GERMANY", <http://www.women-in-Art.com>,
<http://www.women-in-art.com/artists/item/277-darboven-hanne.html> [Accessed 9th May 2014].

²¹²Tryn Collins, Ibid. Quotation from Petra Stegman, "Hanne Darboven: Discipline and Obsession", in *Artist Portrait: Culturebase.net*, <http://www.culturebase.net/artist.php?4060>. Collins believes the similarities of working process highlight a shared value of indifference, of pushing aside the ego, "in an attempt to close the gap between art and life." Cage's was a dedicated study of Zen Buddhism, while Collins believes that in speech Darboven evokes a kind of spiritual investment, quoting the artist as saying: "I have a clear conscience; I have written my thousand pages. In the sense of this responsibility – work, conscience, fulfilment of duty – I am no worse a worker than someone who has built a road."

²¹³ Joachim Kaak, Corinna Thierolf, *Hanne Darboven/John Cage: A Dialogue of Artworks*, (Munich: Bayerische Staatsgemäldesammlungen, from the Staatsgalerie moderner Kunst, München 'Kunstwerke', 2000). The English version of this publication is out of print.

left to encounter various sounds, through the abandoning of traditional hierarchical context often found in music. In contrast, Darboven's music compositions are considerably more 'intimate.'²¹⁴ This is a result of the slow and consistent, working-time manner of these compositions as performed. However, if we are to consider the compositions within the context of the whole artwork, our experience of reading the numbers in the context of the gallery setting engages our reading time with the activity of listening. For we experience the organist's attempt to read and play from the same score we encounter. And while Darboven's composition is non-hierarchical like Cage's, the strict mathematical structure of compositions presents a formality that refuses much space beyond the music and the written numbers, contrary to Cage's work.

Listening to Darboven's *Wunschkonzerte, Opera 17A & B and 18A & B* (1983), Darboven's composition for the double bass acts as a piece without visual elements. Ina Blom describes how the theme and variation of the artist's model disturbs the classical idea of the *well-formed* musical composition, for it "opens up a practice of endless continuity, at once entirely abstract and acutely physical."²¹⁵ Darboven uses a range of variants of a system, so finely calibrated that it is difficult to find a structuring overview. Blom explains the variation as being of "continual, intensive and restless small-scale changes that grate away at the brain, handing perfect tonality over to a sense of imperfection and passage."²¹⁶ She describes a feeling of *effort*, imagining the attempt to perform this four-hour piece, recreating the artist's writing activity through sound. Thus the two events converge, and the musician shares the space of "dedicated

²¹⁴ Tryn Collins, *Ibid.* Reference to Darboven's *II-b*, "it is only comprised of twenty-eight panels; however through her obsessive dedicated repetition, the drawings coalesce into a small ocean of methodical waves."

²¹⁵ Ina Blom "Wunschkonzerte, Opera 17A & B and 18A & B", in *Frieze*, Issue 107, September 2007.

²¹⁶ *Ibid.*

work.” Although there is no visual aid to this particular piece, the encounter still engages the listener with the idea of the process, of the artist’s writing activity activated through the performance. The thinking through the activity of making is rendered through the direct engagement with the work as a recorded object.

Furthermore, unlike Cage’s compositional method based on randomness, there is little evidence of allowing the unplanned in Darboven’s compositions. When considering Cage’s choice to abandon Arnold Schoenberg’s twelve-tone system, one is provided with another compositional structure that may in fact relate more closely to the artist’s process. For I would argue that the original intention of Schoenberg’s atonal method of composition relates, in theory and practice, to Darboven’s compositional activity, regardless of the fact that one is an artist and one a composer working at distinct moments in history.

Darboven and Schoenberg

Living in the US during and after the war, Theodor W. Adorno dealt with the trauma of the Holocaust as a Jewish person living from afar.²¹⁷ His critical response to the atrocities was felt throughout his writing, which dealt with a period between wars and was a response to events. Those working through creative practices, rather than through a critical discourse, continued to work and define an approach that was not easily relatable to anything familiar to culture or the social environment that surrounded them, or to a creative moment that had gone before. This began a period of absences of understanding for what had happened in the recent past. In many ways this is relatable to notions of the *unimaginable* and *unrepresentable*, as identified in the last chapter, and the sense of *not knowing* and the *unsayable*, as discussed earlier.

²¹⁷ One has only to consider Theodor W. Adorno, “Cultural Criticism and Society” (1949), in *Prisms* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1982).

After WWI there was a shift in creative activity in Europe, with a move towards a ‘new objectivity.’²¹⁸ As with the art movement of the same name, there was a creative shift towards an unsentimental reality, focusing on the objective world and therefore rejecting the more idealistic tendencies and emphasis on emotion found in the late romanticism of the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

Schoenberg’s use of the twelve-tone method for writing music was a defiant attempt to distance himself from the pre-war emphasis on Romanticism. Psychoanalysis had played such an important role in understanding Expressionism and Late Romanticism, while with this new method for arranging music, the composer attempted to concentrate on expressions of gesture and style alone, thus attempting to remove himself from the music. Schoenberg claimed that his only intention for the technique was “comprehensibility.”²¹⁹ Regardless of this, the twelve-tone technique is no doubt complex and it immerses the listener in fragmented sounds and multiples of non-repeated variations.

The technique takes up the old elements of canon by inversion, canon backwards, and so forth, for it presents the common preoccupation with a thematic element and the invention of a tune that is derived from other tunes, within which there is no repetition. In many ways, the twelve-tone technique was an extension of a customary preoccupation of composers, that being, its use of musical motifs, transformed rhythmically and in character to represent something different. As Alexander Goehr explains, such techniques have been found in the works of Beethoven and Mozart for example.²²⁰

What was unique about the compositions that Schoenberg and his contemporaries were producing was their approach to harmony, for they rejected pure melodic

²¹⁸ Barrie Gavin, “Bogeyman -- Prophet – Guardian: The Life and Work of Arnold Schoenberg, 1874-1951” (BBC, 1974). Presented by Alexander Goehr.

²¹⁹ Ibid.

²²⁰ Ibid.

technique and simple traditional harmonies, instead creating chords unheard of in the 18th or 19th century. It was from this that Schoenberg had the idea of deriving all elements in a single piece of music from the same arrangement of the notes into some sort of melodic formula.

Schoenberg invented the twelve-tone technique as a way to organise and clarify the procedure of composing the music. It is similar to Darboven's approach in that a clear mathematical logic applies, for all twelve notes are played without any internal repetition. The technique allows the notes to be arranged in different ways, played over the entire instrument, but the order is maintained and played in groups of threes, fours, fives and twos. The twelve notes are divided into a set of three four note chords, and this is where the sound becomes unfamiliar, for these are not tonal chords in the traditional sense, but are regulated to add up to the twelve-tone row.

In the case of Schoenberg, we see an idea being played out through an activity of doing. The composer attempts to separate his emotional being from the activity of making, but through the strict structure put in place, allows the listener to engage with his practice and to activate their own emotional and intellectual responses. The composer moves away from the composition at the point where the listener comes in. One can relate this to the *unsayable* or the notion of being "less conscious" as discussed with reference to Beckett, for the method allows for a procedure of moving away from the composition that allows the composer to remove himself emotionally.

However, when writing about Schoenberg, Adorno claims that the music composition relates back to a form of cognitive functions, and that, as DeNora explains, it operates "at a level beneath consciousness awareness,"²²¹ portraying "the 'true' state of the subject."²²² For Adorno, music documented the discrepancy between the socio-

²²¹ Tia DeNora, *After Adorno: Rethinking Music Sociology* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2003), 11.

²²² *Ibid*, 12.

political subject and object, and in the case of Schoenberg, it illuminates the “homelessness” of the subject.

For Adorno, the first cognitive function of music was to remind the subject of what had been lost. The second function, through the arrangement and procedure of the composition, was to offer models for how “part-whole relationships” come to be conceived and configured. Thus, music had the potential to show “how the subject (being) or material (nature) could stand in relation to the social and cognitive totality.”²²³ Adorno writes that Schoenberg’s efforts find fulfilment in the execution of what the music demands of him, but that such obedience “demands of the composer all possible disobedience, independence, and spontaneity. This is the dialectical nature revealed in the unfolding of the musical material.”²²⁴ For Adorno, the concentration and consistency of formal structure found in compositions present a criticism of an ‘ideology.’ He recognises the revolutionary moments in Schoenberg’s music, when musical expression changes, when the unconsciousness of trauma is revealed through the strict application of a system. For Adorno, “the assumption of a historical tendency in music material contradicts the original conception of the material of music,” for this material is defined in terms of physics and sound psychology. Thus, each composer reacts to their own socio-historical situation, and therefore their compositions define, and are defined by, the history that impacts on them.

Considering Adorno’s theory of the historical tendency of what he terms the “actual compositional material”²²⁵ in relation to Darboven’s number-writing when translated into musical composition, one is able to find the point at which the artist is creating a method that relates more to the activity of writing than to the composition of music.

²²³ Ibid, 12. The author continues: “Musical form didactic function... Music’s second cognitive function was thus critique by example; music was a structure against which other things could be articulated. It was, in this sense, a cognitive resource.”

²²⁴ Theodor W. Adorno, *Philosophy of Modern Music*, (London: Continuum, 2007) 26.

²²⁵ Ibid, 23.

However there still remains little to which the listener can attach the artist's biography, as is the case with Schoenberg, for his compositions create an aural experience completely unlike Darboven's. What is similar is the composer's steadfast servitude to a method that removes the author from an element of decision making. Both Schoenberg and Darboven rely on a strict mathematical structuring, but what renders Schoenberg's musical composition is found in the purpose behind his activity. Darboven presents a system based on numbers, regardless of the influences beyond the numerical formulae, while Schoenberg's technique allows for the notes to be arranged and therefore played. Although arranged in chords unheard of prior to this invention, the notes contain a melodic element key to each piece of music.

Listening to Darboven's compositions, the artist seems to attempt a refusal to be present at all: she acts out the system without any attempt at melody and therefore the emotional or intellectual element is unfounded, only her ability to execute and maintain the formula is made evident. While Schoenberg is making clear choices of sound through variations that do, in part, rely on the traditions of music composition, Darboven's activity is similar to her method of transcribing and so is also relatable back to a textualist reading.

Despite the brevity of some works, Schoenberg's compositions are full of turns in sound and chord variation – fragmented and at times seemingly disconnected. In contrast, Darboven's compositions are endless, circularly prose, strict in conforming to a preconceived structure that relates more to the performance of a writer than to an attempt to communicate through music; the sound of the organ performing takes one into a space reminiscent of the restful reader. This takes us back to the artist's act of transcribing *The Odyssey*, when the action is a concern to reproduce, to write for the sake of a performance of doing, an act of making.

As listeners we might struggle to separate our engagement with the music from the socio-historical moment in which the composer and the artist were working. However,

we can think in terms of language in writing and the concept of the *unsayable* in literature, for in both cases, the composer and artist present the result of an activity of doing, of making, rather than of saying, and thus allow absences to remain. While Schoenberg's twelve-tone technique can be recognised as a reaction to the suffering and the "homelessness" of the composer, Darboven's practice of composition relates more closely to the act of work and the act of writing, and therefore to parts of her activity as an artist.

Conclusion

Darboven's practice can be discussed in relation to a number of themes that relate to theories in art, as well as creative practices beyond the art world. Themes that have been highlighted include the idea of repetition, of a private collecting and documenting enterprise, and writing as process-driven activity, which in the case of Darboven never reaches its finale, but instead circulates in the unfinished or undefined. The lack of a clear definition and conclusion to the works provides a potential to the visual elements to reference conceptual moments beyond the visual. It is this that helps to define Darboven's practice as art. Furthermore, by discussing examples in literature and music in relation to her practice, one is able to find other ways of engaging with the object and non-object-hood of her work; this brings thinking back to what is visually available and what is embedded in the experiences we bring to the artwork.

Darboven's work allows one to consider what it means to conceive of a ritual or an obligation of performance, of making, and the manifestation of this practice into the object of the work of art in relation to the practice of an artist. Her practice plays on the values of meaning and of processes and ordering, of categorising, as much as it is about defining the concept in the activity of making. Yet while we might interpret her *writing* as an action of obsessional recording, as one imagines the artist's practice as a

daily routine, ‘uncreative’ in its formula and aesthetic, one can also find an opportunity to attempt translation or to consider the activity of translation itself, in relation to our expectation of language within and beyond the artwork.

Considering *24 Gesänge opus 14, 15 a, b 1984* in particular, I have approached the experience of this encounter by thinking of each part of the artwork as relating to something beyond the artwork, and thinking of the number-writing as a language that leads us elsewhere, to the sound of the organist and beyond. Moreover, the circulatory nature of this writing activity brings my experience back to the installation. For the artist’s use of “mathematical prose” leaves the viewer in a precarious position for interpretation. Instead, one is able to think about alternative methods for considering the difference between describing and imagining the work of art. We are able to engage with the artist’s method for thinking through an activity of making, which in turn becomes specific to the viewer’s experience of the artwork within and beyond the context of the artwork.

I have identified those parts of the artist’s practice that can be linked to writing and can be considered in relation to the methods found in a *textualist* reading. I have thus presented ways to think about the artist’s practice that might alter how we relate to an idea of the *real* and imagined experience of the visual. The artwork acts as a place from which to consider the absences and expectations we place on the artwork and the visual world around us. Furthermore, engaging the viewer with a kind of literary practice, the artist activates different voices that become realised through the mathematical prose, as with the artist’s technique of collecting and presenting new engagements with found objects. Darboven’s voices remain irreconcilable with the author but instead speak of culture and our relationship with imagery as much as words, signs and numbers. As with the number-writing, oblique moments in the construction of an archive can offer new ways into history and new perspectives on contemporary culture.

Darboven's work as experienced specifically through *24 Gesänge opus 14, 15 a, b 1984* provides an experience of double-rhythms, the shifting of space and time. Experienced in terms of art, as well as literature, theatre and music, the work offers the potential for varied engagements with the material and non-material elements that make up the work of art. This relates to the experience of the artist's practice and to the evidence of process, which leads to our identification of the artist's creative practice. Evidence is thus found of the artist's activity, of the artist thinking through the activity of making.

Conclusion

When Words Fail: on textuality.

Rosalind Krauss begins her essay titled “When Words Fail” by introducing the colloquium of the same title, which took place the year she wrote this essay.²²⁶ It echoes the declarations made by many between the years 1919 and 1939²²⁷ – that with the advent of photography and its development as a medium, language was to be eclipsed by vision.

Before the camera, the written word was the method for maintaining memory: the pen was the tool for transferring speech to a *blunter* form for expression.²²⁸ Rosalind Krauss makes the case that photography provided us with the possibility of activating the moment when the human body enters the space where memory is constructed. In the case of Umbo (Otto Umbehr)’s *self portrait* from 1930 for example, Krauss claims that the artist/photographer identifies himself as the writer and the camera is projected as a surrogate hand, an instrument not of instantaneous vision but of writing. She references Freud to consider the camera as an instrument for registering transitory visual impressions.²²⁹ Just as a pair of spectacles or a telescope might, the camera provides the human body with an addition, providing us with the power to document our memory.

However, the photograph is merely an extension of what writing achieves: another form of recording much like the writer’s task. In this essay, Krauss writes that the photograph of the artist’s hand presents the artist as a composer of line, thus the image

²²⁶ Organized by the International Center of Photography and Goethe House in New York in February 1982.

²²⁷ The colloquium ran in parallel to the exhibition titled “Avant-Garde Photography in Germany 1919-1939”, ICP, New York, 1982.

²²⁸ Rosalind Krauss, “When Words Fail,” *October*, The MIT Press, 22 (Fall 1982), 95.

²²⁹ *Ibid*, 113. See author's reference to Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents* (Connecticut, Martino Fine Books, 2010).

is an assurance of being written into history, “marking the image, and making images of these written marks.”²³⁰

Krauss takes a quotation from Johannes Molzahn, which asserts the power of photography as a weapon against intellectualisation. As a motto of Education, one will be told to forget the activity of reading and instead, to see.²³¹ For Krauss, the camera is not so different from the pen. Therefore, her essay can be read as a critique of such a stance, for one can raise intellectual and ethical concern with such a position. Furthermore, I would argue that it by not recognising the engagement with language when encountering the image, we allow ourselves to neglect to consider our faculty to speak and write about the image. And this occurs when encountering the artwork with reference to a discussion around the parts that are visual and non-visual. By placing an event – be it in memory and therefore a mental image, or in a photographic image, or indeed an artwork – into language, one engages the imagination, and it is here that the dialectical, the thinking self, becomes the ethical self. Thus, to speak and to write can become a matter of positioning ourselves intellectually, politically, emotionally and ethically into the experience.

This thesis has provided a platform to think about language and its potential to function in writing, to consider my own activity of reading and writing in response to art practice, and to consider the method by which I write about artworks. The writing style is a result of returning to certain conventions of writing to consider the encounter with art through my own experiences, referring to a number of writers working in art history and theory to then bring in other writers to challenge personal habits of

²³⁰ Ibid, 92. On Hebert Bayer’s *Self-Portrait*, 1937. See also 92-93 on László Moholy-Nagy’s *Photogram*, 1925-1927.

²³¹ Johannes Molzahn, “Nicht mehr lesen! Sehen!” *Das Kunstblatt* 12, no. 3 (March 1928), 78-82: "The photograph will be one of the most effective weapons against intellectualization, against the mechanization of the spirit. Forgetting reading! See! That will be the motto of Education. Forget reading! See! That will be the essential policy of newspapers."

interpretation. This technique has involved a process of thinking about how one writes about what one sees in the moment of encountering art, as opposed to what one considers to be absent but conceptually present. Consciously I have been thinking about the activity of writing and reading in response to art practice, acting as witness to memory, of writing through an apprenticeship of reading, very much influenced by the work of Cixous, whose writing is informed by daily intellectual, emotional, cultural and historical experiences.

Thinking in terms of *textuality*, the intention has been to show that we can think about the process of making in terms of the writer's activity, as a process of thinking-as-making conducted as research, making and editing. Furthermore, the author's writing can shift us intellectually and emotionally away from our surroundings, which I discussed with reference to examples in Richter's work specifically. The *Grey* paintings, for example, provided an instance to show how art can function, to present a visual that is not entirely apparent in the moment of contemplation. It provided an opportunity to think about making in response to history, and to consider the activity of attempting to articulate experiences that seem to be *unrepresentable*, for example. At this time, I hope to further this through a consideration of Richter's recent *Birkenau* paintings that I have introduced in the *Appendix*.

I believe that the literary motif that runs through much of Darboven's practice can be considered in the experience of Richter's practice and used further to question assumptions of passive reading. This literary reading provides a potential for intellectual, emotional and an ethical engagement relevant not only in a discussion of art practice, but beyond to consider the way we engage with the visual and non-visual world of the past and our present. By selecting two artists to write about (one working with photography and paint, the other with collected objects and what I would claim to be a writing method) my intention has been to position the viewer in a space to consider various means of communication through art practice. This opens the

intellectual spaces between collective and personal thinking, in order to consider how we relate this to creative practice. It also provides an example of the complexities attached to separating biography and art form, which relate to a broader theme within this thesis.

I began working towards this thesis by thinking about how one uses language in response to the experience of art, and considering how certain cultural and social expectations of reading beyond art history and theory can affect this engagement with artistic practice and the presentation of artworks in the exhibition space. This led to a deeper consideration of interpretative text and how the weight of an artist's legacy can seem to remain inescapable during the encounter with the artwork. My interest was in whether we could experience a work of art regardless of biographical information and historical notes, which resulted in thinking of art in terms of how language functions, and realising the potential of this by returning to an engagement with art practice. For myself, I found a potential for a different engagement by thinking more about how the artwork can function beyond these traditional narratives, through other forms of literature. Furthermore, by thinking of art through a textualist reading, and therefore thinking about methods for articulating experience in writing, to consider linguistically the process of *thinking* about the experience, I found a potential for engaging with works of art not only intellectually, but also emotionally, and therefore ethically and politically through other forms of writing. This led to a fresh engagement with writing by art historians and philosophers, while the experience of thinking in terms of other forms of writing and creative practices outside of art informed a new experience of the artworks I was writing about.

As a writer I move towards the final lines of this work, through the performance of writing, in action, as I attempt to conclude this gesture of an activity. This research sits between art history and art practice, and reflects directly on my experience of working with practice-based researchers in the Art Department at Goldsmiths College.

Recognising the social function of art history in relation to the experience of art practice, to see the disjuncture between the two but also the potential for looking deeper into the gaps between the two, my intention has been to present a method for thinking about art practice as a way to negotiate the construction of thought and ideas beyond itself. Furthermore, through my own activity of writing, I wanted to present the potential for thinking textually about the work of art, in order to consider the process of thinking about works of art through my own engagement with artists and my academic background, and to engage with other forms of writing, thinking and creative activity.

Art history

The renegotiation of materiality and form that took place as a consequence of minimalist art, led to ideas and subjects overtaking the object, which later became even more pronounced in conceptual art theory and had a lasting impact on the reception of modern and contemporary art practice. Recognising this, I wanted to consider the processes through which art can, in fact, become figurative through interpretative processes, or how, through a consideration of other forms of intellectually and creative thinking, we can find an alternative way of engaging with the visual elements that make up the work of art. By considering highly visual works produced within the last 50 years, I presented a method for testing how our expectation of the minimal and conceptual in art impacts on our engagement, I presented methods by which one can consider the traditional codes of figuration and furthermore, the creative aspect of the visual, against what is a learnt reaction to materials and the artist's use of them.

When we consider how we attempt to engage intellectually with a work of art, we might think of the imagination constructing a dialectic between what the viewer encounters and the knowledge and understanding they come informed with. Specific

understanding and experiences that are undeniably linked to our emotional and ethical thinking are activated in the public space arena. The art gallery and museum represent universal social and cultural spaces of knowledge. These are the spaces from which this research begins, informed with art history training and curatorial experience. Thus within the context of this research it is impossible to describe how an experience of art might be non-discursive, for the artwork is contextualised to an extent, as soon as we encounter it. What I have proposed throughout is that *textuality* provides another way of thinking about art, a way that takes into account the activity of reading and writing, but towards a different sort of engagement. Instead of providing a space to challenge what we might term discursive or non-discursive when experiencing art, I have attempted to show that the *textualist reading* resists closing down the many ways we can engage with the artwork, opening it up to other areas of cultural life in order to present the potential within and beyond the context of its presentation. By doing so I wanted to show how one is able to activate emotional as well as intellectual thinking in the experience of art.

Challenging conventions of biography

This project considers the work of two non-Jewish German artists working after WWII through a process of analysis, often with reference and in response to ideas found in Jewish hermeneutics and Jewish thinkers after the war. One of the challenges I return to throughout this project is the issue of biography, for it is difficult to avoid when engaging with an artist's practice with reference to their choices of material, subject matter and method for display. However, by looking at their work from this position, it has been possible, at times, to move away from the artist's life and use alternative methods for approaching their practice. As I set out to prove in the chapter on Darboven, the choice of images, objects, etc., can be considered as materials universally available, and we, as the viewer, bring our own biographical information

to the experience of art as we attempt interpretation. As a way of developing this project, it is possible to reflect on the activity of contemporary artists, in terms of using source material as a method for thinking-through-making, thus recognising Darboven's practice in terms of it functioning within a wider social engagement with the act of collecting.

When Didi-Huberman reacts to the four rescued images, he provides a method for thinking about them in terms of a universal reaction to found artefacts. By working through a process to show that the prints cannot act as mere documentation, he places the viewer in an active role when engaging with the image. While this provides a method for thinking about Richter's painting practice and reflecting on his specific experience as a German artist born before the start of WWII, I believe, and sought to show, that his work represents an example of how a more universal engagement with the visual remnants of the past can be had through his painting. Richter is conscious of his own biography as a German post-war artist, but he provides a way to consider the visual while simultaneously proving that it impossible to see or experience an event in its completeness through the experience of a painting or any other form of object or image. His method of thinking about his subject through the painted surface, by re-evaluating the photographic medium and inverting the dialectical possibility of the representation through the painted surface, allows the viewer to consider what it means to revisit history presented through art practice, for we learn to interpret his work through associations of knowledge outside of the painting. What makes his work contemporary and relevant to a discussion on contemporary art practice is the conceptual place it inhabits through practice, for the artist constantly challenges the techniques of painting, leaving the viewer with the choice to attempt to define what can be seen.

The work of Richter and the writing of Didi-Huberman reinforce the photograph as an artefact of the event escaping. Due to the sheer scale and the nature of her practice, the

materiality found in Hanne Darboven's work resists photographic reproduction, while the more intimate elements, that I have sought to identify, render photographic reproduction almost redundant. And it was these other elements, that the viewer might overlook or leave behind, that I wanted to bring into the discussion.

In an attempt to resist the inactivity of the photographs from Auschwitz, Didi-Huberman presented a method to break down the parts of the image in order to realise the presence of ideas that construct the experience of looking. Richter's paintings, meanwhile, challenge the conventions of photography as much as the expectation of some form of return of information that we might expect in a painting method that is so close to photorealism. His, therefore, is a practice that re-evaluates the expectation of the gaze, which the *Grey* paintings so evidently identify, refusing the image while remaining visual. By thinking about this in Richter's and Darboven's practices, in terms of visual and literary language through a consideration of different forms of writing and how they function in relation to art practice, one recognises moments where the connections made between theoretical thinking and biographical readings become entwined and perhaps conflicted with personal thinking, be this intellectual, emotional or ethical. It becomes necessary, therefore, to recognise the material aspect of the practice and how this relates back to our own expectation of it. This is where I thought more deeply about the relationship between art and materiality in relation to other creative practices. This opens the potential for thinking about art as well as considering the difference between imagining, and then describing the work of art, as opposed to naming it in an art historical framework. My intention has been to show that by extrapolating these ideas and thinking more broadly about what we personally bring to the experience of art, we are able to find alternative routes to the experience of the artist's practice. We can then engage more in the activity of making as a way of thinking about materials and ideas, which offers the potential for a broader engagement with art practice.

Thinking through making

As I stated in the introduction, working with researchers in art and beyond through curating and writing, I recognise a process of sourcing reference and materials from a broad range of locations, to create sculptural, filmic and performance pieces, for example. The approach to the development and making of the final artworks is the result of methodical planning and making activity, a thinking through process much like the traditional method of researching and writing. This has impacted on the way that I have considered the practice of Richter and Darboven in light of my own reading and experiences.

As I set out to show, the physical and conceptual elements that make up the artwork are traditionally defined through interpretation and by applying definitions and terminology, while biographical knowledge helps to inform our method for that interpretation. One recognises that the artist, however, also plays a part in how we consider the practice, for his or her physical actions and choices affect the finished work. Taking this latter concept further, I have considered my own experience of working with contemporary artists to reflect upon the creative and intellectual experience of creating artworks, to think about works by well-known and much written-about artists. For example, for Richter, the *Grey* paintings allowed a certain creative and intellectual ‘freedom’ from his position in the art world. Many of these paintings have a formlessness, despite being contained within the picture surface and they still have a sense of ‘non-commitment’ in the final image. For the artist these paintings betrayed nothing of his feelings towards the activity of painting, but by thinking of the process of making and the materiality of these works, we can engage and form our own reaction to the materiality found. Darboven presents a practice that not only relates closer to a tradition of writing, but as I have sought to show through *24 Gesänge opus 14,15 a, b 1984* in particular, engages the viewer in an experience

that resists the culminating, reassuring *image* of the artwork. Instead, we engage in a practice, at times stepping away from the experience with the physical object, to return back and find the multilayers embedded in what is in fact, a highly visual work. Darboven's practice questions the notion of the figurative in art, while the scriptive element is visual and engages the viewer in the action of making, which has also been at odds with my own experience as a viewer, attempting to consider the encounter with the artwork and then write about it. As I have attempted to show, once we question the expectation of an image in order to relate back to what we might expect to understand, there is a potential for a different kind of engagement. As Darboven's practice shows us, we can approach what appears to be a visual 'absence' as an act of displacement. Whether figurative or not, the visual represents the conceptual element that can be considered in language, through ideas outside of traditional art theory.

Textuality

Through my own experience of reading beyond traditional art history books and a conscious consideration of how my reading activity impacted on my own thinking and writing processes, I recognised how reading has the potential to shift the reader from one experience to another. Moving towards different forms of literature, the intention has been to show that reading can impact on our experience of art and that when encountering art, this activity of reading can return, as do other memories of experiences. I wanted to prove that art can function beyond its object-hood and by thinking of the artwork in terms of 'textuality,' it has been possible to present methods to test the moments of visual and non-visual through a consideration of what it means to think about the *unimaginable*, which has resulted in an attempt to think more about the tenants of description. When looking at the work by artists who use text as part of their practice, the emphasis has most commonly been related to how the aesthetic of the text relates to the surface of the work, or how ideas in the writing relate to known

artworks. I began by challenging the conventions of writing in relation to the artwork by choosing works that had no linguistic element in the written sense. Instead I engaged with these works to test how writing is able to function in relation to the visual, which resulted in the chapter on Richter's practice. This research culminated in the chapter on Darboven's practice, where I was able to test the non-literary aspects of her practice, as well as thinking about what we term as literary and non-literary through her numerical formations. This led to thinking about the relationship between her practice and writing as an activity, in order to consider what marks her practice as art as opposed to a composition, for example. Furthermore, by using literary techniques to approach both artists, I was able to show how the viewer finds references beyond the space of the encounter, where information outside the artwork is activated through the absences, regardless of seeming present in the moment of being with the artwork.

Ouaknin's theory surrounding the reactivation of the text as a means of freedom from social language has informed my thinking about these artists. It is fair to say that such thinking (although not necessarily gained from Ouaknin), informs an approach that is universally accepted in art theory, given that this can be recognised in Benjamin's interpretation of living in the present, with reflection on history, as well as Derrida's deconstruction of language and his ideas on historicity and the archive, for example. By working through Didi-Huberman's *Images in Spite of All*, I was able to closely consider one method for approaching the visual through writing, but also to reflect on my own understanding of the Holocaust, showing that choices in language are informed by our inherited experiences of events that we have second or third-hand knowledge of. I found myself reflecting on a Jewish methodology in order to return back to my engagement with art, in order to question my own assumptions that affect the gaze. Image and language can become intertwined, un-differential even, in our attempt to find the object of the Holocaust, yet in the case of thinking the event, both

are ultimately inadequate. By beginning with a consideration of Richter's work through a reading of Didi-Huberman's essay, I argued that subjective visual representation and its reception are based on both universal and specific terms that do not always remain clearly differentiated when we reflect on them. Thus, there remains a difficulty in recognising where one ends and the other begins, which is a theme that runs throughout the thesis. The Holocaust remains, for many, *unimaginable*: there remain absences, the spaces in between that remain without subjectivity, without the image. By presenting Didi-Huberman's essay on four images rescued from Auschwitz, I was able to present key issues regarding the expectation of the gaze and our need to ground it to what we already know. I wanted to consider our need to articulate experience, despite the division between what is visually available and what is not. By moving this further to the writing outside traditional art theory, including Handelman, Steiner and Cixous, I wanted to present alternative methods for thinking about the spaces between what we see and what we consider ourselves to understand, to then inform our experience of art. As shown, this provides a method to think about how we find and negotiate ideas relating subject to 'material' presence and absence, by which we find or lose the presence of the artist in the work, and can consider the artist's activity as thinking-through-making.

Textuality: a methodology

My approach to writing this thesis has been one that relates directly to my own experiences of research, curating, and writing in the art world, and the experience of being in academia, working with practice-based researchers. While certain methods of reading in Judaism can be recognised throughout this thesis, in order to ensure that the artworks remained at the centre of both chapters, this research has moved away from certain original expectations due to the engagement with practice-based researchers, and moved more towards considered reflection on my own engagement with

contemporary art practice. However, certain aspects became manifest throughout as I found that my relationship with a particular activity of thinking about art remains based on certain inherited cultural experiences and expectations. My intention, therefore, has been to analyse this somewhat away from the thesis in order to return to the artworks, with reference to key aspects learnt en route.

Throughout the experience of working closely with other researchers and academics in the Art Department and beyond through conferences and symposia, for example, I recognised, and wanted to show, that the method of questioning assumed that habits of interpretation can be related to other activities of study and theoretical thinking in the study of art, which take on aspects of philosophical thinking. In order to avoid generalisations, I often approached a method of self-reflection through the writing, in order to test my own assumptions, but also to reflect on aspects of the experience gained working with other writers, curators, artists and academics within the Art Department. This shift in approach has helped me to think further about how the artwork functions and to test how the distances between oneself and the ‘real’ engagement shifts as a result of what one reads, writes and listens to, as much as daily experiences and inherited and living memory.

Thinking of the body as “an effect of linguistic processes”, we recognise ideas and thoughts that are affected by what we have read as much as the use of language that we inherit: that being the associations one finds between words and history, the activity of translation, and how we relate to visual and non-visual experiences of art. One key aspect of this process is the way that memory functions in relation to our expectation of the gesture of making art, for the conceptual elements found in the artwork can only inform our interpretation when we relate what we find to concepts outside the gaze. I claimed that the dialectical in art is the point at which we attempt to ground the experience and give it meaning. And furthermore, because the visual is embedded in linguistic experience, my intention has been to prove that our

relationship to the visual and the experience of art relate to our use of language that we develop in order to articulate a response. This is the dialectical moment, which Didi-Huberman sees as the point at which the visual and the non-visual compete for identification, to bring to the surface other moments of realisation. There is a moment when the imagination constructs the dialectic between what is being perceived as opposed to what one already knows. Therefore the dialectical moment occurs when we reconcile the object or the image of the object with the imagination or memory.

Hélène Cixous's writing has set a precedent for critical writing; she presents a method for interrogating themes that runs throughout my research and allows for both self-reflexivity and criticality. The writtenness of what she writes gives a voice to writing, while it speaks on a number of levels that resist over-generalisation. When approaching her writing, one is often left unable to sum up the parts into one unified moment of engagement. Moments of autobiography are often written as though they are some fictional narrative, while moments philosophical and immersed in theoretical, feminist thinking are played out in musings on the activity of writing. It is this multifaceted, multi-various approach that I have come to recognise in much contemporary art practice, which has impacted on my own approach to research and writing this thesis. I believe that Cixous remains a presence throughout this thesis and has opened up several possibilities for how this research might continue.

Writing is an instrument that can disturb assumptions of interpretation and question the points at which we remove the act of looking from the engagement with visual art. Based on subjectivity, I considered the ability to use language without claiming a position or an intention of my writing; be it art criticism or philosophy. I have taken ideas of art writing as a creative practice to inform my own writing, resulting in an activity that sits between art theory and art practice, motivated by different aspects of reading and writing as one activity.

By engaging with known artworks, I was able to challenge the legacies attached to the artist in order to ask questions about how one negotiates moments of engaging with art. I believe that the experience of working within the environment of art practice research has allowed me to consider how writing relates to practice and to recognise the influence of my findings as I continue to write about and curate exhibitions with contemporary artists. The distances and the spaces between the activity of writing and art practice and the notion of *un-thinking* the work of art have been tested through a practice separate to this thesis. I have also theorised the activity and performance of writing, as a result of positioning myself in the context of practice-led research. I hope that this will inform the continuation of this research either as part of, or separate to, the writing of the PhD.

Limitations of research and intentions for continuation

Words such as ‘dialectic’, ‘metaphor,’ and ‘trace,’ come with a great weight of theory behind them, and while developing this research, there has been an awareness of the breadth of subject matter, which might in fact have been the limitation of this project. Consequently I see this piece of research as the foundation and testing space for ideas, through a selection of writers that are specific to the key concerns that I set out to investigate through an engagement with art practice.

By identifying an intellectual space between art history and art practice, I continuously attempted to challenge my position and my use of language in relation to ideas about terminology in relation to the experience of the artwork. By thinking in terms of how writing can function in and beyond art theory, this research became concerned with the activity of writing about art now, as a practice that considers the artist’s approach to writing as a practice, but also as a method for thinking about the specific experience of writing for oneself, while communicating a method for thinking about art. My intention here was to concentrate on the selected artworks and by going further into

literary themes that took this research into other creative and recording activities – be it music composition or archiving – I was conscious of moving towards other areas of thought. This presents itself as another route through which to continue this research beyond the MPhil, but at this stage the challenge remained to bring this back to art, while initiating new ways of engaging different creative and intellectual activities with art practice.

One way that this research could continue is to open up the ideas discussed around the work of Richter and Darboven, to write more specifically about contemporary art practice, in order to think in terms of contemporary image production, how it is mediated and subject to virtual communication, through my model of thinking and writing.

Our relationship with the image is very different to the one Krauss speaks of, but her essay raises ideas that could potentially be drawn out beyond this thesis. While the advent and development of photography might appear to eclipse language by vision, we live at a time when we are constantly questioning the tenants of the visual experience. Our memory, for example, has become less reliable for we turn to external sources from the Internet to relate back to events, becoming overloaded with imagery that provides potential for multiple narratives to emerge. Our need to document in writing about our experiences is, perhaps, unnecessary, even though we do this through avenues of social media, and have the potential to communicate our personal opinion and experiences more easily and widely. Thinking about this in terms of art practice and our response to it, as outlined in the recent issue of *Texte zur Kunst*, everyone is empowered to speak, thus the hyper-personal voice renders institutional authority somewhat “arbitrary and romantic.”²³²

Umbo (Otto Umbehr)’s self-portrait is a reminder that photography is like writing, for it presents a perspective of an event. Photography has the same potential for acting as

²³² “Poetry,” *Texte Zur Kunst*, no. 103 (September 2016).

the pen, an extension of what writing can achieve, but still, undoubtedly, what it presents remains, to an extent limited by its object-hood. With the advent of the digital age, we have the potential to make our lives and our opinions public, continuously self-editing and erasing memories. By looking at the use of imagery and ideas around textual and visual language in contemporary art practice, one question to continue this research might be: how can we consider this contemporary condition in relation to the artist's practice today?

The contemporary persistence of the image does relate to language, for one references language in order to negotiate ideas that surround the image. Now more conscious of the many techniques and devices used to create images, our position in relation to the result of these techniques has shifted. With better access to the tools required to make images of our own, we are now observer and maker.

Richter's and Darboven's work offer methods for thinking about art practice as a creative and intellectual engagement with the visual and non-visual world we inhabit. By discussing their practices beyond traditional concepts of art, I have attempted to present ways in which we can identify elements that offer a fresh take on their respective practices. By doing so, I wanted to present themes that are relevant in the discussion of contemporary art practice, thus proving the importance of looking at past artworks to engage with contemporary art practice. Both Richter and Darboven engage the viewer with the past through techniques that challenge our concept of memory and recognition, making one's own memories present in the larger historical narratives presented in the context of artworks. Neither artist provide anything concrete in terms of a discursive experience, so ultimately the viewer is left to place the works together, with reference to their own engagement with the past and present.

I have touched on the work of contemporary artists working in the archive, selecting visual and non-visual documentation to present alternative models for engaging with the past. I mentioned artists including Petra Feriancova and Zbyněk Baladrán, for

example, whose work provided examples of thinking about Darboven's practice with reference to contemporary art practice. Moving forward with this body of research, I would like to further this by considering key themes through my writing activity in response to the work of contemporary artists. Adam Broomberg and Oliver Chanarin's *War Primer 2* (2011), is an example of how contemporary artists are responding to the mass of imagery available online, often anonymous and of poor quality. Bertolt Brecht's 1955 *War Primer* is a collection of newspaper clippings, each accompanied by a four-line poem called Photo-epigrams. The German poet and playwright felt uneasy about the role of photography, referring to press photographs as *hieroglyphics*, in need of decoding. Through a seemingly simple use of language, Brecht created opportunity for critical engagement with the medium of photojournalism. Adam Broomberg's and Oliver Chanarin's *War Primer 2* (2011) acts as a sequel to *War Primer*, concerned with images from both sides of the "War on Terror." Here the artists layered Google search results that resonated with each poem over the original, thus activating another layer to the original book. Thinking about this project would provide a way of thinking about the shifting spaces of language and *meaning* we attach to images, as presented in contemporary practice and the broader visual world around us. It would provide a means for thinking about the ways in which contemporary artists are sourcing material from beyond the immediate visual and non-visual world of their contemporary setting to re-evaluate our past and present in keeping with certain themes and ideas that I have identified in Richter's and Darboven's practices.

Another way of continuing beyond this project is to think more in terms of the themes that make up the term *textuality*. The activity of researching and writing for this thesis has resulted in finding methods by which to test the relationship between writing and speech, using writing as a method for undoing categorisation. I could have developed this further, but at the risk of losing the rigour of theory that I believe was fundamental to the position I am claiming at this time. The consideration of materiality is

fundamental to this research and comes from a place where practice plays a key role in the positioning of critical thinking. This project has continued to move closer to consider the artist's practice in relation to the practice of the writer and so I am interested to consider how the two positions can develop. For example, Hélène Cixous presents the body in the writing, so here, the verbal activity of speech is present, while the activity of reading and writing invites thought on how one breaks the silences when engaging with art. While presenting ideas related to this here and in presentations outside of this thesis, I believe that I could go further to consider the gesture and the performance of writing as a method for pronouncing, which could have been acted out in relation to contemporary artistic practice.²³³ I am interested to explore this in terms of creating narratives around works of art, which could highlight what the activity of writing might mean in terms of a curatorial as much as a writing practice. Cixous is key to this, but so are other writers I might introduce, such as Julia Kristeva and Luce Irigaray.

I would like to focus further on the approach to writing influenced by Cixous. To consider how she acts as a witness to memory, informing the writing process by daily intellectual, emotional, cultural and historical experiences. I would pursue this through ideas that relate to Jewish hermeneutics, thinking in terms of a language that points inwards to a network of relations and to the construction of narrative entangled in layers of history.

I believe that this research has opened a potential for thinking about creative activity beyond art practice, for thinking about other forms of writing and music composition for example, in terms of what it means to think about the activity of thinking-through-making. It also realises the potential to approach the visual and non-visual world

²³³ Adrian Rifkin, "From an Obstructed Viewpoint, Art-Writing-Image: It never rains but it pours - history as sympathetic magic", (Second of four lectures presented as part of series, Iniva, October 16, 2012).

through different creative and literary endeavours. Although I only touch on Samuel Beckett, a possible way of moving forward with this project would be to return to his work to consider methods for engaging with literary practices. The Guardian recently published an article about the fourth and final volume of letters by Samuel Beckett, written between 1966 and 1989. It marks the moment when Beckett won the Nobel Prize and, as I quote, when the writer was “weary with words.”²³⁴ On 28th March 1968, Beckett wrote to Stephen Block, telling him that he found it impossible to write or speak about his work, for “my only contact with it is from the inside and I understand very imperfectly the effect it has on readers and critics.” Later when writing in 1976, he describes his short play titled *Footfalls*, as “a strange affair...But it is not aimed at the intelligence.” Chis Power, the author of the article, refers to this quotation as illuminating with reference to the emotional content of Beckett’s work. Power writes: “Something he understood about art, as well as any other practitioner you might name, is that nothing outdoes mysteries that remain mysteries.”²³⁵ Such a sentence appears to close down engagement, but also highlight where comparisons can be made with points I raised in both chapters regarding the engagement with art. The notion of only being in contact with one’s own practice from the inside relates to my method for thinking about the artist’s practice. For my intention has been to encourage the reader to think about the process of making in relation to their own experiences, moving slightly away from the emphasis often placed on the artist’s biographical details or their personal response to the artwork. In the manner in which I considered ideas of the *unrepresentable* and *unimaginable* through Richter’s paintings and the

²³⁴ Chris Power, “The Letters of Samuel Beckett 1966-1989 Review – a ‘long Farewelling,’” *Guardian*, October 19, 2016, sec. Books, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/oct/19/the-letters-of-samuel-beckett-1966-1989-review>. [Accessed 20th December 2016].

²³⁵ *Ibid.*

supposed absences in the work of Darboven, I would think about Beckett's work in terms of creative activity as a way of thinking about language, despite the 'mysteries.' By touching on ideas surrounding Beckett's writing and the absences that appear in literature, I have found ways in which I can potentially continue working on elements related to ideas I set out in the introduction. One aspect that I would particularly like to consider further is the subject of past and present European Jewish culture that came through during the discussion on Richter and Darboven. For example, the idea of an imperative to write is interesting, as is the idea of a routine of doing as opposed to making, which relates the writing practice to making in art. Further to this, by introducing the writing of Adorno on Schoenberg, I could identify further the relationship between writing and music, as well as the relationship between writing and art. Themes such as silence, absence and the trace – which are touched upon and remain of interest in relation to thinking-as-making – are material for a more specifying research project that can continue with what has been found in the context of this MPhil. Furthermore, when considering the role of circulation and sociability in the 'production of knowledge', I think that this project might support further research on where the line sits between theory and practice, within and beyond the institutionalisation of art within the academy.

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Appendix: On Gerhard Richter's *Birkenau* paintings.

In 2014 Gerhard Richter produced a series of four paintings titled *Birkenau*. (Images 41-44)²³⁶ Immediately after completing the paintings, the artist produced sets of digital copies, with each painting divided into four equally sized quadrants, thus comprising 16 digital prints in total.

Rather than incorporating a reading of the *Birkenau* paintings into the Richter chapter, I have decided to focus on them separately as an afterword, that I hope will form the basis for a longer discussion at a later date. At the time of writing the chapter, these paintings did not exist. In 2016, Benjamin Buchloh's essay revealed that the artist had spent some six years intermittently working with photographs of the rescued prints that Didi-Huberman wrote about in *Images in Spite of All*, before he finally produced the four abstract paintings. These paintings exist as abstract works, titled after the artist had painted over original sketches made from the prints, thus the subject matter has been somewhat imposed on reflection. This provides an opportunity to consider the artist's activity of thinking-through-making and to ask at what point the artist was thinking about the photographs left in graphite below the surface.

Firstly, it is worth referencing that these four paintings contrast greatly to the six paintings catalogued immediately before them. The first is a series of five paintings, titled *Abstract Painting*, 2009²³⁷ (Image 35-39) These are followed by *Doppelgrau*, 2014²³⁸ (Image 40) a single painting that presents two clean blocks of grey, one lighter than the other, rendered in lacquer on the back of glass. This piece was shown with the duplicate prints at Whitworth Art Gallery in Manchester in 2015.²³⁹

²³⁶ Gerhard Richter, *Birkenau* (937-1,2,3, and 4), 2014, oil on canvas, 260 x 200 cm

²³⁷ Gerhard Richter, *Abstraktes Bild* (911-1,2,3,4) , 2009, oil on canvas, 200 x 300 cm; *Abstraktes Bild* (911-5), 2009, oil on canvas, 280 x 280 cm

²³⁸ Gerhard Richter, *Doppelgrau* (935-4), 2014, lacquer on back of glass, 200 x 400 cm

²³⁹ "MIF15: Richter / Pärt" (Whitworth Art Gallery, Manchester, July 9-19, 2015).

Perhaps it is no coincidence that the previous five paintings are titled 911 in the catalogue. A group of large near-monochrome paintings that underlie a structure layered by translucent veils of white paint, these paintings are non-representable abstract works. They are considered by Benjamin Buchloh as sitting within the larger context of reductivist painting in Europe and the US, as a post-war trajectory of art practice.²⁴⁰ Buchloh describes the white surfaces in these paintings as acting in the manner of a palimpsest, a literary reference to a manuscript of writing that has been effaced by later writing. For here the white surfaces do not erase or efface colour; instead the paintings operate because of the intertwining layers of paint, the partial removal, the addition and subtraction. The tools Richter uses, here and in the *Birkenau* paintings – wooden rulers and squeegees – play out an ambiguity between competency and functionality. As a contemporary condition of Richter's practice, the activity of making has become a performance of craft, coming together with the tools and techniques of industry. The careful preparation of colour is well-considered and yet, works are created through chance and control, allowing residual colour to come through to create almost visible images. These monochrome works represent a continued approach to production in the recent history of Richter's abstract works, for they present the act of painting as a process of informed making and one of accident. Intentionality combines with the chance engagement between materials and the structures the artist sets in place.

The white and the muted colours rendered in these paintings, which on looking are far from monochromatic, have a peacefulness that defy the production. They present a wash of non-colour that almost hides the activity beneath, as though rendering an image and then veiling it with a fog-like haze that obliterates our gaze. Patches of

²⁴⁰ Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, *Gerhard Richter: Abstract Paintings 2009* (König, 2009), https://books.google.co.uk/books/about/Gerhard_Richter.html?id=pkpOQwAACAAJ. Published on the occasion of "Gerhard Richter: Abstract Paintings, 2009", The Marian Goodman Gallery, New York, 7th November 2009 - 9th January 2010

white scrape the surface, blending with a previously applied colour to create pale blues and purple shades that softly turn into murky traces of yellowish greens and greys. The visible vertical and horizontal lines provide a sense of terrain, but one could also be at sea, enveloped in a sheet of mist, having lost the point of the horizon.

These paintings contrast greatly with the series titled *Birkenhau*, where the lines of the moving paint are rendered in shades of black and white, red and green, which merge together to form purple, pink and orange tones. The white in the background splinters into the other shades, making the surface sludgy, almost murky. So busy is the activity found in these paintings that, at first glance, they in fact reject any notion of the reduction described by Buchloh as a condition of the artist's reductivist stance. Rather than erase colour through technique and the choice of white, the artist smears the canvas with dark, heavy shades, in a gesture that marks these works as a series. Like the rescued photographs, these works form a montage, for each responds to the other, defined by the repetition of colours and the method with which the paint is applied.

Two of the monochrome paintings – 911-2 and 911-5 – were presented in Richter's major retrospective titled *Panorama* in 2011/2012. It was in the catalogue for this exhibition that Richter discussed his refusal to make artworks out of the rescued photographs. That same year the film on Richter was released in which he again spoke of the prints found in *Images*. Richter first encountered these four photographs in a review of Didi-Huberman's study in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (11 February, 2008). At his Atelier Hanwald in 2008, the artist shows Corinna Belz his office in which he has a number of framed images presented on the wall. Above a small image of a painting rendering a four square pattern, between an exhibition invitation for a show of Picasso's drawings and a photograph of a stained glass window in a cathedral, is one of the prints from the book. When he speaks of the Picasso print he explains that it is a mirror-inverted and enlarged print presenting one of the artist's drawings of a head. Richter says: "I wanted to know what it could tell me today. This brutal thing

here with its growths, its deformed, squashed head ...”. And then he moves on to the photograph, describing it as “astonishing”. “It’s fascinating how peaceful it looks, how normal.”²⁴¹ This conversation creates another opportunity to speculate on what led Richter to the decision to recreate the images found in the four prints after all. However, more can be gained by spending time thinking about the physical aspects found in the final paintings, to then consider what is missing, and think about the artist’s process as thinking-through-making.

Through a reading of Buchloh’s 2016 essay, we first learn that the artist attempted to turn the photographs into paintings, projecting the images onto a wall and sketching them in graphite on four large canvases. His intention was to turn them into dark “grisaille” paintings similar to the *October 18, 1977* from 1987. After a year of hesitation and return, the artist decided to reject the project, erasing the drawings by painting over them, to create abstract works. When we think of erasing the image, one thinks of the idea of completely effacing what was once there, which is in fact, contrary to the process the artist undertook when approaching these abstract paintings. Furthermore, while we learn that the artist only got as far as drawing the projected images, it is difficult not to consider these paintings against the artist’s earlier grisaille paintings or, in fact the *Grey* paintings, when witnessing the sludgy black and white merging to form heavy grey smears across the canvas. In addition, unlike his paintings of the last 20 years, here the artist limits himself in terms of using two complementary colours of red and green. The four canvases are covered in a netlike, irregular grid design punctuated with what Buchloh describes as “minimal confrontations” of colour.²⁴² The gesture of the artist is evident as hesitant and self-confined; the familiar markings of expression found in previous paintings are replaced by a “stifling

²⁴¹ Belz, *Gerhard Richter Painting*.

²⁴² Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, *Gerhard Richter’s Birkenau-Paintings* (Cologne, Germany: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, 2016), 21.

reduction” in the final work, which impacts on how one engages with the visual remnants of the artist’s practice.²⁴³

Buchloh writes that these paintings exchange gesture and chromatic opulence for what he describes as “a painterly stutter”, for the artist appears to be “stultifying even the most minimal expressivity as though even a minimal painterly gesture was considered already as going too far.”²⁴⁴ Despite this “stutter”, these paintings still contain a plenitude of form and colour that is at odds with the original prints. The black and white paint allows one to imagine the images being rendered and then obliterated through the artist’s activity of moving the squeegee over the canvas and allowing the paint to act through the process. In the first of these paintings (937-1), the black paint, although found in almost all surface areas, heaves from the top, dragged down, creating streaks of a watery line that fades as it reaches the bottom. The lines are cut across with horizontal movement to create rectangular formations that become larger as the eye is led to the bottom. Red is introduced in specks to concentrate just below the middle of the canvas, while a white, murky patch is the only space without activity, although still filled with murky streaks of greyish paint. Areas of smudged purple, heavier black or red and green uneven patterns create shadows and illusion to hidden imagery, and yet nothing appears.

In the next canvas, variations of black tone still dominate the canvas (937-2), again through an application of paint to form lines running vertically and horizontally. The top and bottom of the canvas present heavier blackish grey tones, smudged and erased to give the impression of a reflection of a shadow, as if in a watery pool. The stark red paint draws one’s eyes to the centre of the canvas, while splatterings of the same shade circulate and merge into the white to form pink hues. The top left has the trickle of green from the previous canvas, while light, baby pink and blue tones can be found

²⁴³ Ibid.

²⁴⁴ Ibid., 23.

floating through the heavy black. This canvas gives a strong sense of shadows forming as the eye traces the surface, while trickles of black provide form and patterns that render the idea of an image.

Moving to the third canvas (937-3), the red and green tones of the previous canvases dominate this painting; the black is pushed to the background, still above the white canvas. Streaks of red turn into purple and pink tones, moving up and across the canvas and presenting the artist's movement, for the paint seems to dominate the execution of this work. Colour escapes control, while the green and pale pink tones splatter. Again, the black and white smudge to create a shadowy, watery appearance, while sheets of black form heavier shadows to give shape to the canvas, for the eyes move in all direction when attempting to comprehend all the moments rendered in this painting.

In the fourth canvas (937-4) colour dominates the canvas with vertical and horizontal streaks that merge with the black and white beneath. Interjected moments occur when red and green sit over the black and white areas, while the black and white migrate to form the watery shadows found in other paintings from the series. In this painting particularly, one gains a sense of a scene played out in the background. With the title and my awareness of the photographs, one might almost get a sense that figures are rendered beneath the paint, the colour obliterating the view of a scene. The heavy black and red area at the top centre-left of the canvas weighs heavily on the gaze, while the dash of green and pink just below the middle weighs it down. This painting, in particular, tires the eyes, for it makes the gaze busy, creating imprints that are only representable of something as a mental image, for really there is *nothing* to see and yet endlessly overwhelming shapes and colour are being formed. Perhaps knowing the original photographs creates a sense of movement that is almost filmic, for these paintings articulate the gesture of Alex taking the photograph as quickly as he can.

And yet, this is just my interpretation, for I am placing an idea of a narrative upon the painting.

A textualist reading of painting.

As though reading a novel, the painted surface shifts our thinking, moving us away from our immediate surroundings to think the visual representation in front of us. And yet, these canvases draw us back in, for the title contextualises these paintings before we look upon them. When reading a text we bring ideas that help us to gain meaning from what we read. This notion of reading as a form of writing can be considered when approaching these paintings, knowing that the artist has painted over a version of the found photographs, adding and editing layers to create a visual landscape.

My interpretation of these paintings is based on observation and a use of language, now familiar to the reader. I too find elements in these paintings that refer back to my own pre-found understanding of the artist's process and conversations he had about these photographs. As I sought to present throughout this thesis, art has the potential to show that our linguistical bodies are part of the encounter with art, and so we return the visual elements found in artwork back to the imagination in an attempt to find recognition of images. Furthermore, when I refer above to the *nothing* in these paintings, I still reference shape and colour, these being elements that are contextualised and that remain within language.

One might consider how to react to these paintings without knowing about the artist's process of making. Following the approach set out within this thesis, one can follow Didi-Huberman's method for engaging with the found photographs. He takes different aspects of film and archival documents and by doing so, presents a technique that provides a way of thinking about the potential of writing, and thinking about the visual world, through different cultural and historical references. Furthermore, by thinking about the paintings in terms of the montage, one recognises that experience is based on

the moment when the imagination constructs the dialectic between what is being perceived and what is already known. Thinking in terms of the montage provides a way to think about our relationship with the visual world we encounter daily and our living memory that can impact on our experience of art practice. Words set our experiences into motion and by thinking of the visual world as based on our use of language, we recognise that our lives are narratives enveloped in this use of language. Therefore language remains a constant within the construction of images and the process of thinking-through-making when considering the activity of the artist's practice.

When Benjamin Buchloh describes the artist's making activity as a "stutter", he suggests a resistance to pronounce, that he believes is inherent through the four paintings. The artist expresses and *gestures* in a minimal way as though resisting movement as a method for containing ideas or emotion. Here, the writer refers to speech, thinking beyond the canvas to evaluate the painting activity. When considering Alex's *gesture* of taking the photographs, Didi-Huberman describes his activity as an *utterance*. In this case, the *gesture* of taking a photograph is where the real – that being the indexical real – appears to the viewer. By describing this 'gesture' of taking the photograph as an "utterance", the moment the indexical real appears is the point at which the image relates back to language. Here the viewer has to suspend contemplation in order to restore the moment being imagined. The same occurs when Buchloh describes the artist's activity as a "stutter." To perceive both the rescued photographs and the paintings, the idea of an image is put into context, given meaning by grounding the experience of looking at the photograph and the painting through a use of language.

Furthermore, colour, as discussed in the chapter on Richter, is contextualised. It is impossible to remove the associations we place with the colours green and red. Given that green remains forever associated with ideas of nature, and red to many things,

among which is death. Buchloh describes the colours as the two “fundamental hues of a cruel cycle of life and destruction, overcome by the natural impulses of growing and forgetting.”²⁴⁵ The black and white, meanwhile, return us back to Richter’s grisaille technique of painting, and the *Grey* paintings beginning in 1962 and continuing throughout his career. Thus, the paintings reveal elements coded within the artist’s practice. Another approach is to think of how these shades blend to create grey, the colour of non-commitment and formlessness, the colour of the shadow hiding narrative. Here grey is presented in fragmented, hesitant deposits that deny the idea of a cohesive photographic image. Thus, the soothing, often melancholic, nature of the grey monochrome paintings is lost.

When writing about colour, again I think in terms of the language I use. Within this process are contradictions, as often felt when in dialogue, when one opinion negates the other. These paintings are capable of such an effect, for they have dialectical duality between being “visible and visual, detail and ‘patch’, resemblance and difference, anthropomorphism and abstraction, form and formlessness,” like the rescued photographs.²⁴⁶ The dialectical becomes the moment when the visual and non-visual compete for identification, to bring other moments of realisation to the surface.

On the *unrepresentable*

When speaking of photography, Richter says that one gets used to photographs: “you think you know the guy, but it’s not true ... You know the world of photos, but not the world they photographed.”²⁴⁷ As Buchloh explains, the artist confronts himself and the viewer with the challenge of contemplating a painterly artwork that is itself a cultural

²⁴⁵ Ibid., 24.

²⁴⁶ Didi-Huberman, *Images in Spite of All*, 79–80.

²⁴⁷ Belz, *Gerhard Richter Painting*.

production that has lost all reference to historical reflection.²⁴⁸ The artist continues thinking through the process of making on the necessity of “reconstructing a mnemonic”, while simultaneously showing that such an image cannot be produced. For Buchloh, this process can be recognised as among the foundational conditions of Richter’s painterly production,²⁴⁹ as he explains, this “dialectic of an individual subjective desire for a mnemonic representation and the objective necessity to erase, if not prohibit, these images might be one of the structural conditions that have governed his work.”²⁵⁰

In the chapter presented as part of this thesis, I considered the photographs and what it means to think about the parts of the visual that are not considered *useful* and adequate at documenting moments from the past. Thinking about what these elements do when we attempt to engage with them, we can ask at what point does visual engagement become a matter of the ocular as opposed to an attempt to reflect on pre-found knowledge? Thus there is a tension between what is represented and what is found in the image. Richter’s paintings reveal nothing recognisable of the original photographs, so instead we attempt to make sense of the title with the content found. We react to the paintings through associations with different forms of knowing, through the language we use to relate the image back to our own understanding gathered through image searches, as we might with the photographs from Auschwitz. Richter presents us with the realisation that, in fact, there remains an impossibility of seeing an event in its completeness, regardless of it being rendered in paint or found in the photograph.

Thinking about Richter’s other paintings, *September* functions in response to the title. When thinking in terms of how *September* creates a sense of the emotional impact of the events of 9/11, one is left positioning an interpretation between what one knows in

²⁴⁸ Buchloh, *Gerhard Richter’s Birkenau-Paintings*, 21.

²⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 7.

²⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

relation to the title, and how one thinks the painted surface to form an image of the planes crashing into the World Trade Center buildings. This small painting is representative of private and social narratives, meaning attached to fragments of evidence witnessed through broadcast channels, testimonials, recordings of the immediate reaction on the ground, imagined telephone farewells from above, but also of an event beyond any image represented. It is, therefore, representative of the moments that could not be seen and yet this painting resists being entirely representative of anything. Thinking in terms of other paintings that represent historical narratives, the *October Cycle 1977* invites the viewer to consider the throwaway newspaper photograph. As discussed, these paintings deal with the idea of representation, implicating the viewer to find human presence in the painted surface. Both works are examples of how Richter invites the viewer to think about the nature of painting and what art can be in contemporary culture. He encourages us to give time to the act of *looking*, to contemplate his ideas surrounding difficult moments in history that position the act of viewing within an ethical context. We become conscious of our role in retelling the narratives, for such paintings play on our intellectual and emotional reactions, on the *montage* of knowledge.

September speaks of the lack of human representation when first seeing the planes hit, our knowledge of life lost is embedded in our emotional reaction to the painting, for we know, moments later, that images of people falling from the Towers were broadcast. We also assume that no human image is hidden behind layers of paint as we understand there to be in the *Birkenau* paintings. Human presence behaves differently in the *October Cycle*, for in this instance the very act of looking upon the image of human beings is challenged. In both cases, the paintings represent moments within recent living memory that can be understood within contemporary culture. Conversely, the *Birkenau* paintings react to another moment in time, fraught with complex reactions to the retelling of narratives. When Richter spoke of the negative prints, he

implied that turning these images into much larger paintings would be to their detriment. However, in doing so, the artist presents an opportunity to test the viewer, to contemplate the very notion of the *unrepresentable*, through the process of making. But in creating these abstract paintings, the artist returns the question back to the viewer, for in fact, we are left with very little representative of the original photographs within the context of these canvases.

For Didi-Huberman, the “troubling singularity” he finds in the rescued photographs engage the viewer on a more intimate level. We witness Alex’s gesture through his inability to create clear reproductions of the events. In our attempt to engage with the photographs, we contemplate the image alongside the recognition of Alex’s rushed attempt, therefore engaging on a more personal level with the photographs. The rescued photographs stand between the *real* event and our understanding of it, while the isolated image can consolidate our gaze in order to understand it, as it renders the narrative still. However, these images refuse to become 'inanimate', which is in keeping with Richter’s original stance against reproducing them. They maintain subjective and intersubjective ownership²⁵¹ unlike the fetish object, regardless of any attempt to isolate them. By attempting to reproduce them and then *failing*, Richter continues to refuse himself the possession of the event as represented. However, by rendering the images as abstract paintings, Richter allows the viewer another attempt to contemplate the notion of the image as a sight to be looked at, but in doing so still refuses possession, for nothing is representative of the original prints, however much we may attempt to recognise them. Through the titling of Richter’s paintings, we can assume the artist’s intention is for his viewer to reflect on these abstract paintings with reference to the photographs. Richter activates the viewer in thinking the photographs through his creative engagement with them, thus engaging the viewer to think about the idea of an image in relation to the activity of making.

²⁵¹ Ibid., 77

When thinking in terms of Richter's abstract painting technique, the question arises as to whether abstraction can serve to represent what is considered *unrepresentable* subject matter. We can do so, perhaps, by thinking about these paintings and how they are differentiated by the artist's other abstract works. By doing so, we associate ideas found in the painted surface to an intellectual and emotional reaction, based on choices of colour and the process of making, as outlined above. However, as soon as we attempt to interpret the meaning behind the colour choice and gesture, we are drawn back to the painting as an act, returning to associations that fail in the real encounter with a representation of the Holocaust. Ultimately, the act of painting separates memory from the event.

Richter's work has a strangeness at the point where the image becomes familiar or recognisable, for in these instances the artist creates the fiction, 'fetishised' through a process of work evident in the craft of the painted surface. Richter's more photorealistic works recreate the flatness of the photographic image, reminding the viewer that not all can be rendered in a photograph. Conversely, his abstract paintings are rich in texture, while the surfaces we find challenge the conventions of *seeing* an image. In the case of the *Birkenau* paintings, it is as if we are always just missing the representative parts of the painting, as though we just arrived too late, or as though we are attempting to watch a broken television set that continuously draws us back to the programme and then, through muffled sound and broken images, refuses a clear sense of narrative. Whether photorealistic or abstract, the artist always refuses the totality of the gaze. And by doing so, the artist reinforces that absences always remain, regardless of the experience.

Richter's practice also highlights the contradictions of what photography means for us now. As discussed with reference to the *October* series, while the photograph can never reproduce an event in its entirety, there is also reason to consider Didi-Huberman's defence against the claim that the photographic image is a "lie."

Regardless of how ‘good’ or necessary the photograph is, for Didi-Huberman, we cannot leave these moments of memory unlooked upon, for we are left confusing impossibility with illegitimacy, thereby rendering such photographs objects of prohibition and thus eradication.²⁵² Richter’s painting can be thought about in these terms, for as Buchloh points out, Richter’s painterly practice has always been concerned with mnemonic recuperation. The artist situates painting as the counter-figure to the destruction of memory²⁵³, for while his painting challenges the legitimacy of photography, he also reinstates the image found as a device for challenging our perceptive and interpretative faculties. Richter’s abstract representation of the photographs asks the viewer to think about the memory of the event, to consider the original photographs and what they represent, and to contrast this with their intellectual and emotional reaction to the painted surface. Here Richter is activating the viewer in thinking the original through his own creative engagement with it, therefore thinking the idea of the image in relation to the activity of making. By thinking in these terms, one is able to identify the *gesture* of the artist, to relate to the activity of the artist as thinking through the process of making.

On presentation

Richter has identified the four paintings as original objects that will remain unsold, thus removing them from the mechanism of marketing and also adding to their potential value. The two sets of digital copies, meanwhile, can be sold as 16 separate works. At the presentation of the paintings at the Albertinum in Dresden (28th February – 27th September 2015), the artist presented the paintings and the duplicates on opposite walls. The unique quality of painting was confronted by proliferation and

²⁵² Ibid., 156.

²⁵³ Buchloh, *Gerhard Richter’s Birkenau-Paintings*, 30.

multiplicity, therefore subverting any chance of monumentality that could be associated with the original paintings.

At a recent presentation in Manchester, Richter presented the four *Birkenau* “photo-versions” with *Double Grey* (2014). During the exhibition, *Drei Hirtenkinder aus Fátima*, a new piece written by Estonian composer Arvo Pärt was performed. *Double Grey* consists of two panels of subtly different hues behind enamelled glass, which play a formal game of similarity and difference, for the paint, hidden from view, is on the reverse of glass sheets. The glass reflects back to the viewer, drawing us into the painting but also having a distancing quality. The colour grey takes on another meaning in the context of this presentation, for again, we might think of the grey in terms of the photographic image, the attempt to *see* something identifiable in the photographs *without use*, to realise that it consists of shapes that we have endowed upon it with our imagination. We use language to describe the effect of these grey panels, as we do with the *Birkenhau* paintings, and as we do so there is a collapse of representation, for we fold any identification to the referential back on itself and away from the artwork.

These presentations and the choice to create and display duplicates of the original paintings allow us to consider our engagement with the rescued photographs as four montage images that make up one object, as presented through Didi-Huberman’s analysis. Furthermore, we can approach this duplication and multiplicity as the artist’s attempt to present the doubling that occurs in the moment of looking at the photographs. As Didi-Huberman writes, the image is never just one thing²⁵⁴ and therefore remains dialectical. The four individual paintings become objects to be fetishised by the audience. If sold and separated, the duplicate images become the missing parts of the complete image, but not of the painting itself, for they act as a mere representation of the painting. Our relationship with these duplicates is an uneasy

²⁵⁴ Didi-Huberman, *Images in Spite of All*, 151.

one for we resolve to question the presence of the artwork. But we might also think of this making activity in terms of the proliferation of the rescued photographs, duplicated through printed and online representation, only to remind us that they remain documentation that will continue to attempt to present an event that keeps escaping.

Moving into the commercial art world, one could also claim that Richter's act of creating duplicates merely provides the marketing potential of the *Birkenau* paintings, and in fact, turns an object representative of the Holocaust into a desired commodity. It can be expected that these duplicate prints will be endowed with a value found in works of any kind made by the artist, for it is the artist himself who represents the commodity. Perhaps, through the creation of this series, the artist plays on the notion of value and commodity, and at the same time, brings the history of the Holocaust into such an arena. The realisation of what the rescued photographs also stand to represent remains necessary in an age of developing photographic technology that has shifted our relationship with the visual world around us. Richter reminds the viewer that any image is an object, decipherable and significant through the imaginative and speculative relation to events that are implicated in its making.

Chapter one: Dialectics of the imaginable. Gerhard Richter's *Grey* paintings



Image 1,2, 3, and 4, Anonymous, photograph negatives, August 1944. Oswiecim, Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum.

Examples from the Grau (Grey) series:



Image 5: Richter, Gerhard, *Grau (Grey)*, (194-16) oil on canvas, 1967,
34 cm x 28 cm, www.gerhard-richter.com



Image 6: Richter, Gerhard, *Grau (Grey)*, (194-12) oil on canvas, 1968,
40 cm x 35 cm, www.gerhard-richter.com



Image 7: Richter, Gerhard, *Ohne Titel (grau) Untitled (Grey)*, (94-6), oil on canvas, 1968, 50 cm x 50 cm, www.gerhard-richter.com



Image 8: Richter, Gerhard, *Wolken (grau) Clouds (Grey)*, (231-1), oil on canvas, 1969, 150 cm x 200 cm, www.gerhard-richter.com



Image 9: Richter, Gerhard, *Wolken (Grau) Clouds (Grey)*, (231-2.), oil on canvas, 1969, 150 cm x 200 cm, www.gerhard-richter.com



Image 10: Richter, Gerhard, *Grau (Grey)*, (367-1), oil on canvas, 1975, 225 x 175 cm, www.gerhard-richter.com



Image 11: Richter, Gerhard, *Grau (Grey)*, (393), oil on wood,
1976, 144.5 x 150 cm, www.gerhard-richter.com

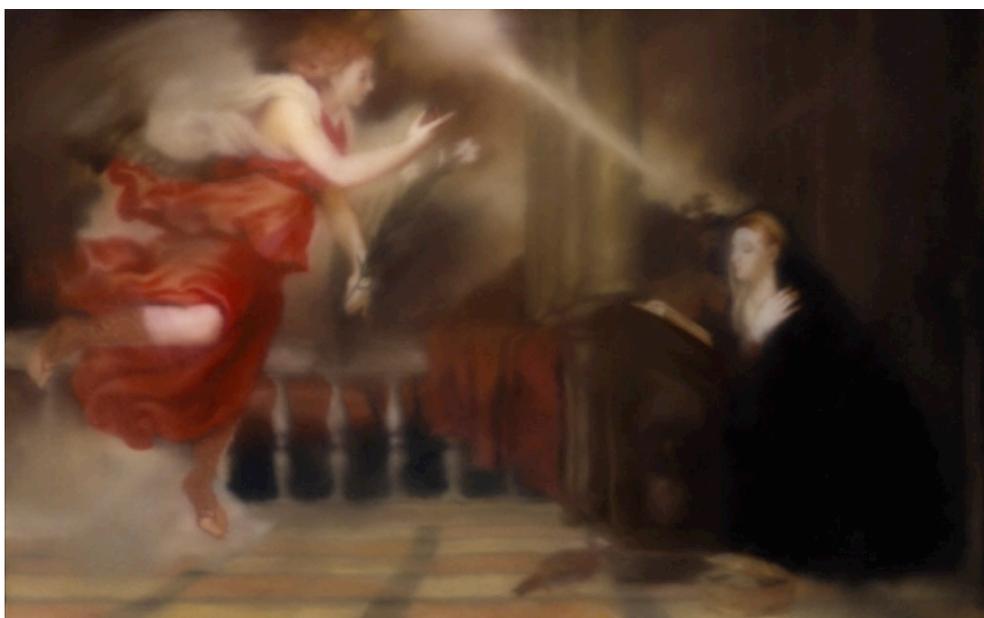


Image 12: Richter, Gerhard, *Annunciation after Titian*, (343-1), oil on canvas,
1973 125 x 200 cm, www.gerhard-richter.com

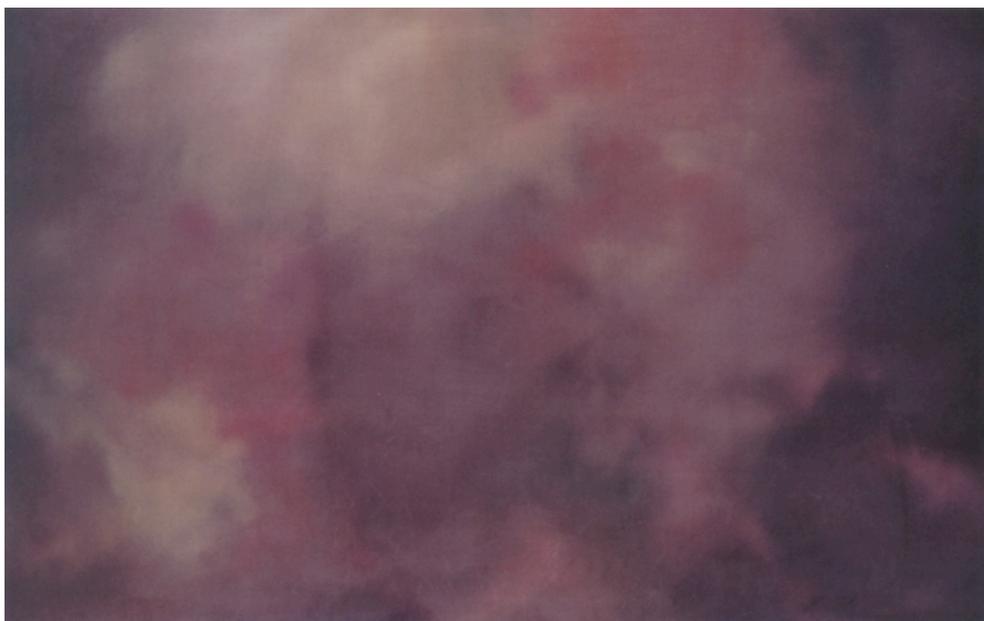


Image 13: Richter, Gerhard, *Annunciation after Titian*, (343-2), oil on canvas, 1973, 125 x 200 cm, www.gerhard-richter.com



Image 14: Richter, Gerhard, *Annunciation after Titian*, (344-1), oil on canvas, 1973, 150 x 250 cm, www.gerhard-richter.com



Image 15: Richter, Gerhard, *Annunciation after Titian*, (344-2), oil on canvas, 1973, 150 x 250 cm, www.gerhard-richter.com



Image 16: Richter, Gerhard, *Annunciation after Titian*, (344-3), oil on canvas, 1973, 150 x 250 cm, www.gerhard-richter.com



Image 17: Richter, Gerhard, *Betty*, (425-4), oil on canvas, 1977,
50 x 40 cm, www.gerhard-richter.com

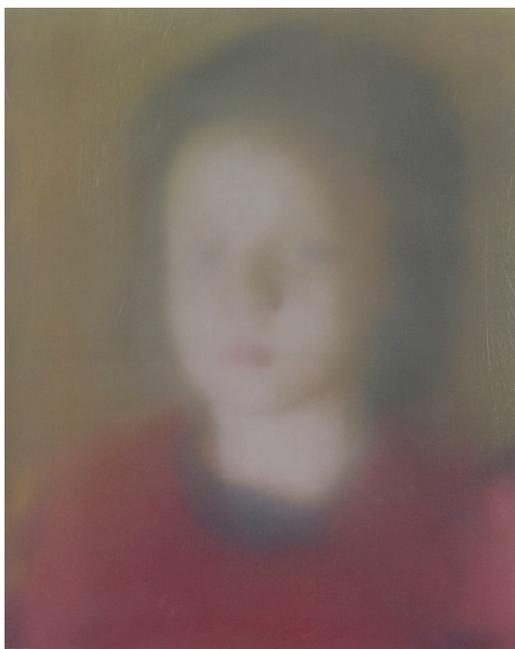


Image 18: Richter, Gerhard, *Betty*,(425-4), oil on canvas, 1977,
50 x 40 cm, www.gerhard-richter.com



Image 19: Fra Angelico, Fresco representing the annunciation, 190 x 164 cm, Museo di San Marco, Florence, 1440-41

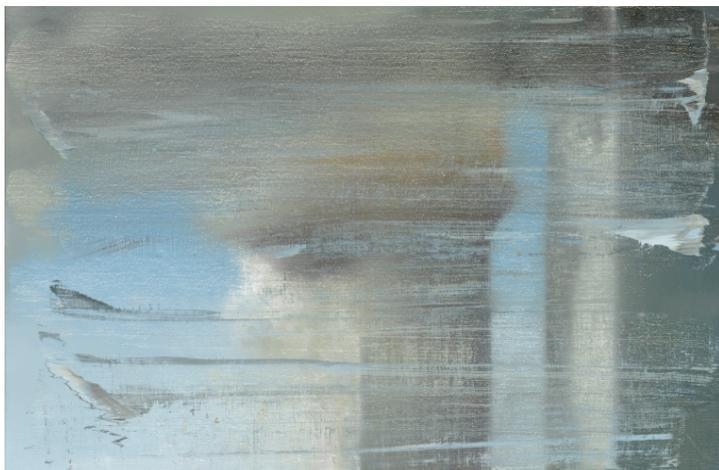


Image 20: Richter, Gerhard, *September*, (891-5), oil on canvas, 2005, 52 x 72 cm, www.gerhard-richter.com



Image 21: Richter, Gerhard, *Cell*, (670), oil on canvas, 1988,

200 x 140 cm, www.gerhard-richter.com



Image 22: Richter, Gerhard, *Gegenüberstellung 1*, (*Confrontation 1*), (671-1), oil on canvas,

1988, 112 cm x 102 cm, www.gerhard-richter.com



Image 23: Richter, Gerhard, *Gegenüberstellung 2 (Confrontation 2)*, (671-2), oil on canvas, 1988, 112 cm x 102 cm, www.gerhard-richter.com



Image 24: Richter, Gerhard, *Gegenüberstellung 3 (Confrontation 3)*, (671-3), oil on canvas, 1988, 112 cm x 102 cm, www.gerhard-richter.com



Image 25: Richter, Gerhard, *Jugendbildnis (Youth Portrait)*, (672-1), oil on canvas, 1988, 67 x 62 cm, www.gerhard-richter.com

Chapter three: The performance and undoing of writing. Hanne Darboven's *24 Gesänge opus 14,15 a, b 1984*

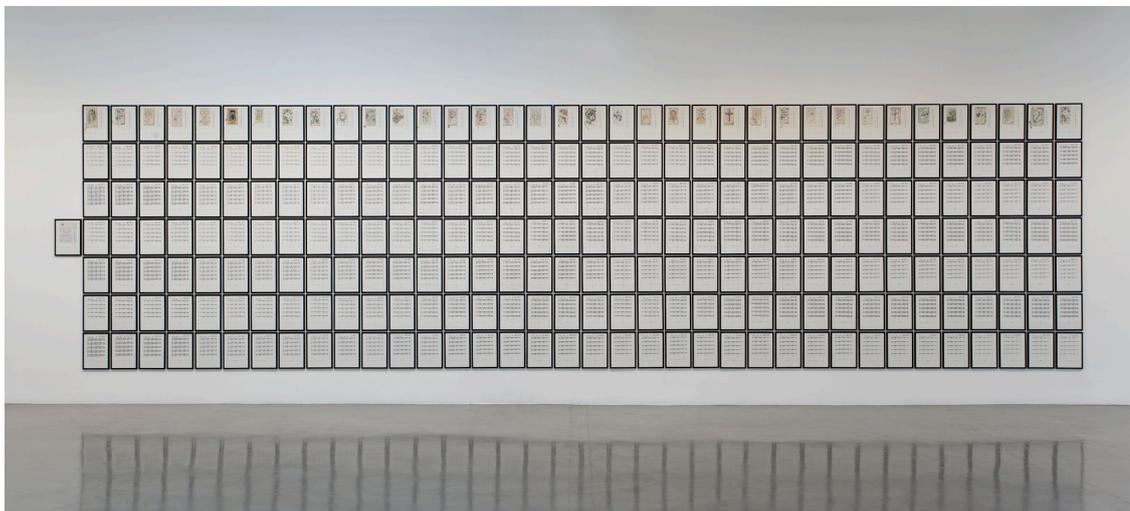


Image 26 and 27: Darboven, Hanne, *24 Gesänge opus 14,15 a, b 1984* [*24 songs opus 14, 15 a, b 1984*, felt-tip pen on paper, postcards, greeting cards, sound, 1984, dimensions variable, The collection of the Hanne Darboven Foundation Hamburg. Installation views from “Hanne Darboven”, Camden Arts Centre, London 2012, www.contemporarydaily.com/www.artslant.com

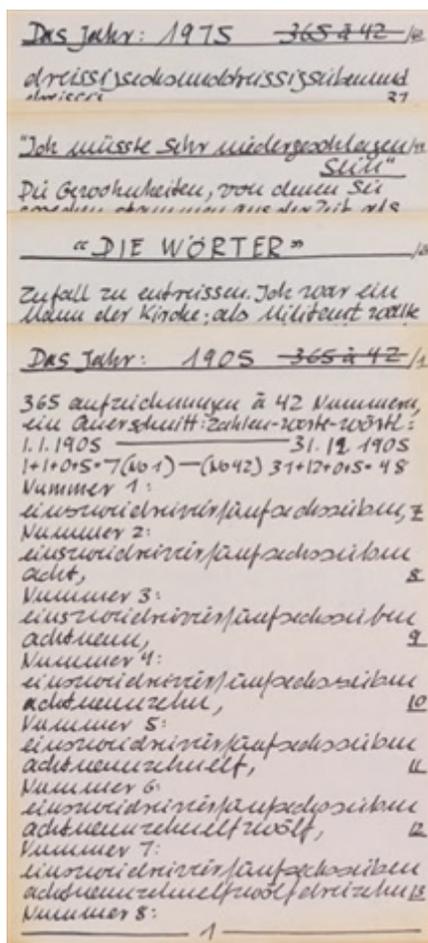


Image 30: Darboven, Hanne, *Ohne Titel (Sartre)* (73 works), works on paper, 1975-76, 29.7 x 21 cm, www.artvalue.com



Image 31: Darboven, Hanne, *Kulturgeschichte 1880-1983 (Cultural History 1980-83)*, mixed media: found images, selected found objects, ink on paper, 1980-83, dimensions variable. Installation view at Dia:Beacon, Riggio Galleries, Beacon, New York, May 2003-March 2005. Lannan Foundation; long-term loan. Photo: Florian Holzherr. Courtesy Dia Art Foundation, New York, www.x-traonline.org



Image 32: Darboven, Hanne, *Kulturgeschichte 1880-1983 (Cultural History 1980–83)*, mixed media: found images, media cuttings, selected found objects, ink on paper, 1980-83, dimensions variable. Installation view at Dia:Beacon, Riggio Galleries, Beacon, New York, May 2003–March 2005. Lannan Foundation; long-term loan. Photo: Florian Holzherr. Courtesy Dia Art Foundation, New York, www.diaart.org



Image 33: Darboven, Hanne *Kulturgeschichte 1880-1983 (Cultural History 1880-1983)*, mixed media: found images, media cuttings, selected found objects, ink on paper, 1980-83, dimensions variable, at Dia Center for the Arts, 1996 (installation views). Photos by Cathy Carver, www.diaart.org

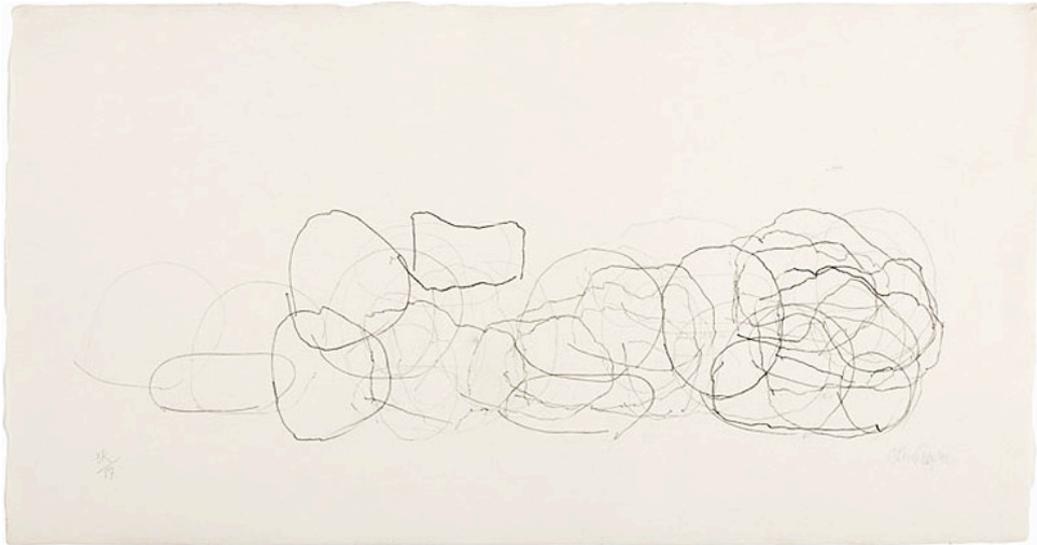


Image 34: John Cage (1912-1992), *Where R = Ryoanji (3R/17)*, 1992, Pencils on handmade Japanese paper, 25.4 x 48.3 cm, The John Cage Trust, Red Hook, New York, Photo: David Heald/SRGF, New York, © The John Cage Trust at Bard College.

Appendix: On Gerhard Richter's *Birkenau* paintings, 2014.



Image 35: Richter, Gerhard, *Abstraktes Bild* (Abstract Painting), (911-1), oil on canvas, 2009, 200 x 300 cm, www.gerhard-richter.com



Image 36: Richter, Gerhard, *Abstraktes Bild* (Abstract Painting), (911-2), oil on canvas, 2009, 200 x 300 cm, www.gerhard-richter.com

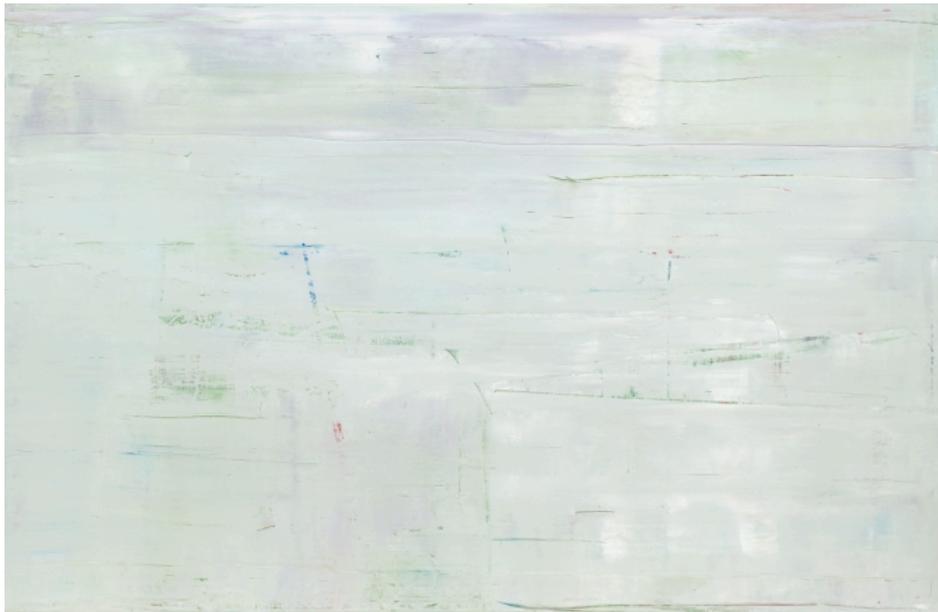


Image 37: Richter, Gerhard, *Abstraktes Bild* (Abstract Painting), (911-3), oil on canvas, 2009, 200 x 300 cm, www.gerhard-richter.com



Image 38: Richter, Gerhard, *Abstraktes Bild* (Abstract Painting), (911-4), oil on canvas, 2009, 200 x 300 cm, www.gerhard-richter.com



Image 39: Richter, Gerhard, *Abstraktes Bild (Abstract Painting)*, (911-5), oil on canvas, 2009, 280 x 280 cm, www.gerhard-richter.com

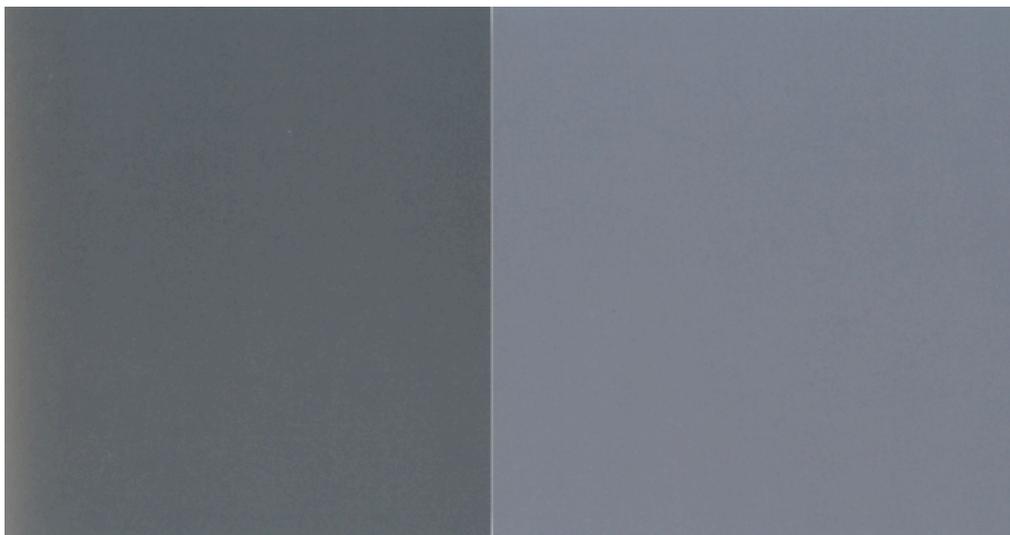


Image 40: Richter, Gerhard, *Doppelgrau*, (935-4), lacquer on back of glass, 2014, 200 x 400 cm, www.gerhard-richter.com



Image 41: Richter, Gerhard, *Birkenau*, (937-1), oil on canvas, 2014, 260 x 200 cm,
www.gerhard-richter.com



Image 42: Richter, Gerhard, *Birkenau*, (937-2), oil on canvas, 2014, 260 x 200 cm,
www.gerhard-richter.com



Image 43: Richter, Gerhard, *Birkenau*, (937-3), oil on canvas, 2014, 260 x 200 cm,
www.gerhard-richter.com



Image 44: Richter, Gerhard, *Birkenau*, (937-4), oil on canvas, 2014, 260 x 200 cm,
www.gerhard-richter.com