

Blurred Schemata Truth: A Study of Gerhard Richter's Works

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Abstract: This paper utilizes the foundational framework of "Schema Theory" to delve into the schematic cognition within Gerhard Richter's paintings. By synthesizing the artist's life experiences, autobiographical writings, essays, and the visual representations of his contemporaneous works, the study uncovers the latent "schematic" threads within the artist's oeuvre. It scrutinizes the implicit expression of internal sensations throughout the transition from "sensory intuition" to "intellectual schema" and ultimately to "image visualization," clarifying the obscured connections between layers. The paper seeks to apply Schema Theory concretely within the realm of art studies, addressing the extensive analytical challenges of artwork interpretation and offering a multidimensional analytical perspective on the creative mechanisms of Schema Theory in aesthetic cognition, particularly within the non-realist domain.

Keywords: Schema Theory, Image, Layer, Painting

1. Introduction

In conducting an in-depth analysis of the visual evolution of Gerhard Richter's works, it becomes evident that his artistic expression transitions from the figurative to the abstract. However, describing this transformation as a shift to the "non-realistic" or "non-figurative" may be more appropriate. This transition is not arbitrary but stems from the artist's profound deconstruction and innovative reconstruction of realism, particularly photography. Richter's non-realistic style is deeply rooted in a critical reflection and transcendence of traditional representational techniques.

As viewers engage with these works, they are often driven by curiosity about the artist's inner world. They attempt to explore and uncover the stories behind Richter's artistic creation through the brushstrokes, colors, and images on the canvas. They hope to penetrate the surface of the work to touch the artist's sensitive and delicate spiritual realm or to evoke their own internal artistic responses. However, such explorations are often limited by the information provided by the works themselves and the limited reports about the artist, resulting in potentially incomplete interpretations by viewers.

Kant's schema theory offers a novel perspective in this process. Kant regarded schemas as the bridge between intellectual concepts and sensory intuition, enabling us to combine abstract concepts with concrete experiences. In Richter's works, the depth of vision does not originate from the visual effects of the painting itself but from the subjective consciousness of the viewer. Thus, we can consider the abstract nature manifested during the process of appreciation and understanding as a "schema" model. This model not only represents reality but also reflects the artist's inner world and a profound contemplation of the real world.

2. The Application of Schema in Painting

2.1. The Universality of Schemas

German philosopher Immanuel Kant introduced the concept of "schema" in his seminal work "Critique of Pure Reason" (1781), defining it as the transcendental homogeneous third entity that connects categories with phenomena. ^[1] Kant posited that the condition for knowledge acquisition is the application of categories to sensory intuition, achieving their unity. However, due to the essential heterogeneity of categories and phenomena, a mediating third term, the schema, is required to reconcile their differences. The schema serves as a structural bond between concepts and perceptual objects,

connecting not only concepts with intuition but also sensibility with understanding. Kant further distinguished between "sensory schema" and "pure intellectual concept schema," that is, "transcendental schema" and "empirical schema," and provided a profound rational deduction of these, a theory that has had a profound impact on subsequent philosophy.

Arthur Schopenhauer highly praised Kant's distinction between phenomena and things-in-themselves, deeming it surpassing all previous philosophical thoughts in terms of profundity and thoroughness of philosophical argumentation, and noting that the consequences of this distinction are infinitely rich. ^[2] Jean Piaget accepted Kant's schema theory and, from his constructivist perspective, regarded schemas as concepts or categories of cognitive structures. Rudolf Arnheim applied the schema theory to the analysis of visual arts, offering a new perspective on the application of schema theory in visual arts and the psychology of perception. Donald Davidson, through the translatability of language, elucidated the universality and unity of the schema concept from a linguistic perspective, arguing that conceptual schemas are closely related to language and that differences in language reflect differences in conceptual schemas. ^[3]

Kant's schema theory provides us with a framework that allows for a deeper understanding of the perception and appreciation of artistic images. As innate cognitive structures, schemas are universally present in our cognitive processes, unifying our sensory intuition and conceptual thinking about art, and enabling the expression of both abstract and concrete concepts within schemas. In the realm of art, the schema acts as a bridge of communication between the artist and the viewer, transforming abstract brushstrokes and colors into a deep understanding of the artist's conceptual world, thereby enriching our perception and appreciation of art.

2.2. Painting as a Schematic Medium

Ernst H. Gombrich not only developed the application of schema theory in the fine arts but also regarded schemas in visual arts as variable prototypes, a concept that deepens our understanding of the diversity of artistic works. The diversity of artworks is explained through shared fundamental schemas, which in turn evoke unique experiences in the hearts of each viewer. As described in Gombrich's "Art and Illusion: A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation," the story of Matisse's studio ^[4] reveals how artworks transcend the boundaries of reality, touch the internal schemas of the viewer, and provoke in-depth thinking about the nature of art.

When we consider Gerhard Richter's paintings as conceptual "schemas," we adopt a perspective different from the "abstract schemas" mentioned in the introduction. For instance, understanding one of Richter's landscape oil paintings as pure "painting," akin to the conceptual triangle in geometry, allows us not only to perceive the role of artworks on the level of visual imagery but also to profoundly comprehend them as carriers of the artist's innate cognition and deep conceptual expression. This perspective places Richter's works within an interconnected network, transcending the monotonous understanding of them as isolated individual pieces. Through this lens, we can reveal the intrinsic connections between works and how they collectively construct the artist's unique visual language and ideological system.

In the process of art appreciation, the viewer's contemplation is a dynamic interplay of personal experiential schemas and a priori schemas. Each viewer brings their unique life experiences and cultural background to the interpretation of the work, demonstrating the subjectivity and multidimensionality of art appreciation. This multidimensional appreciation process not only provides a personalized experience for the viewer but also allows the meaning of artworks to circulate and evolve among different viewers. An in-depth analysis of the conceptual schemas in Richter's works enables a more comprehensive understanding of the complexity and richness of art. This understanding transcends superficial aesthetic appreciation, engaging with the deep interaction between art and human cognition, emotion, and the spiritual world. Thus, viewing artworks as conceptual schemas is not just an academic theoretical exploration but also a reflection of profound insight into the essence of art.

2.3. The Artistic Evolution of Schemas

Gombrich's concept of the schema "prototype" has been endowed with a more profound conceptual understanding in the contemporary field of painting. It no longer merely represents a fixed image pattern but has become a dynamic cognitive structure for "painting" or the "image" of artistic forms. The development of modern art has led to a diversity and constant evolution of painting graphics, endowing the "prototype" with ambiguity and variability. When using schema theory to explore various

issues in art research, the primary task is to clarify the specific manifestation path of schema theory.

Paintings, as the visual outcome of the artist's deep artistic thinking schemas, not only mark the peak of visual thinking in the creative process but also represent the externalization of the artist's inner world. They are the ultimate manifestation of the artist's artistic thinking schemas. For the appreciators, these works are not the end of the artistic experience but the starting point for the personal artistic thinking (image) schematization, stimulating their own imagination and comprehension. Schema theory emphasizes the intermediary role between intellectual concepts and perceptual intuition. In the process of artistic creation and appreciation, the schema serves as a bridge connecting the artist's inner world with external expression, and the audience's perception with internal experience. The artist's creation is an active process of schematization, where they transform internal thinking into a visual artistic form through personalized schemas. Correspondingly, the audience's appreciation is a reverse process of schematization, where they reconstruct their personal artistic experience through their own perception and understanding. From this, it is not difficult to deduce a simple formula of connection:

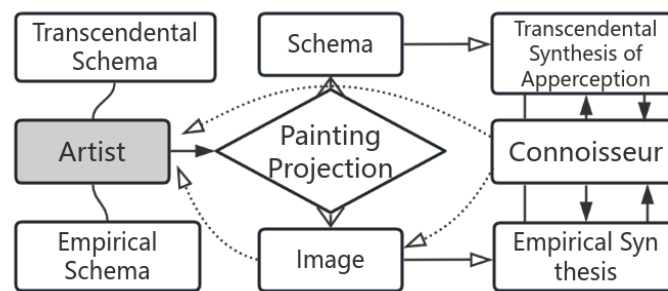


Figure 1. The relationship diagram of painting as a schematizing medium

When exploring the representational capacity of artworks, it is essential to avoid simplistically equating paintings with things-in-themselves. The thing-in-itself refers to the entity of a thing independent of our perception, whereas artworks, as creations of human beings, are products of the interaction between sensory intuition and intellectual concepts. The result of the painting's representational capacity—sensations—are part of the subject's intellectual structure, not attributes of the thing-in-itself. When we regard "painting" as a conceptual "schema," the process of the integration of subject and object in artistic appreciation is no longer confined by the style of the work; both abstract feelings and concrete images will naturally occur in the exchange of art. The generation of the viewer's internal sensations is based on their imagination, which stems from the viewer's memory and a certain poetic sensibility. [5]

As Kant stated, the beauty of art exists in the harmonious accord of particular things existing in accordance with concepts, a harmony that stimulates the harmonious activity of the mental faculties. Painting (as material), as an opportunity or revelation of pure intuition and pure thought, becomes a bridge connecting different worlds of the mind, showcasing the common emotions and thoughts of humanity. Schema theory provides insight into the complexity of artistic creation and appreciation, as well as the rich connotations of artworks as they circulate among different subjects. Through the process of illusion, adaptation, and correction, schema theory fosters the re-creation of artistic images, enabling a deeper understanding of the dual identity of painting.

3. A Discussion on the 'Truth of Schema' in the Works of Richter and Tapies

Antoni Tàpies, as a representative figure of mixed media painting, has forged a new path of innovation between abstraction and figuration, and is considered a pioneer of "non-formalism," "non-formal abstraction," and "art without form." He firmly believed that painting is essentially abstract and insisted that "the so-called 'reality' never exists in painting, but only in the mind of the viewer". [6] His works project sensory values through material substances, while their inherent forms reveal emotional schemas by resisting traditional styles. In his mixed media paintings, the illusory wall becomes a pervasive element of a composite schema. Tàpies also mentioned: "There exists an original Unity or a total and authentic Reality which we share with the universe and all human beings", [7] which resonates with Kant's notion of the innate unity of pure conceptual schemas.

Gerhard Richter's works easily capture visual schematic clues, allowing viewers to quickly construct schemas based on the "photo-like" readability of his works, such as the evident landscape

images in <Figure 2, 3>. However, this initial schema is soon disrupted by the deep metaphors held by Richter. In the process of schema correction and matching, the artistic connotations hidden by Richter gradually emerge. This approach is similar to Tàpies's 'wall,' which, along with 'photographs,' can easily match in the viewer's schema classification; yet, the illusory nature they reflect subtly conceals the artist's true intentions. These characteristics have deeply attracted researchers, prompting them to analyze the life meanings hidden behind the schemas to gain insights into modern painting creation. From the viewer's perspective, the perceptual schema presented in Richter's works is but a fleeting stay, soon dissolved by the deep illusory nature of the works.



Figure 2. <Snow>, 1999, Richter.



Figure 3. <Italian Landscape>, 1967, Richter.

<https://www.gerhard-richter.com/>

Antoni Tàpies and Gerhard Richter have demonstrated distinct approaches in their use of material substances in artistic practice. Tàpies focuses on the direct expression of materials, emphasizing the sensory value and emotional schemas inherent in the materials themselves, while Richter pays attention to the indirect expression through layers, revealing fragments of time and deeper conceptual connotations. Yoanna Terziyska, in her research, points out that the "layering" in Richter's works is not only visual but also temporal; this temporality reflects on memories and images and connects the temporal context of the works.^[8]

Researchers prefer to avoid using political metaphors to interpret Richter's works, instead exploring the order and calmness embodied in his works from the perspective of schematic image memory. Richter's works guide researchers to re-evaluate the truth of schemas and consider how non-figurative graphics in modern painting construct memories and time through discussions of temporality and reflection on the authenticity of memory.

Comparing and analyzing the works of Tàpies and Richter from the perspective of schema theory reveals that both artists are exploring the concept of "abstraction," but the sources of their abstract attributes differ. Tàpies constructs clear schemas through purely abstract artistic forms, while Richter creates schemas with abstract conceptual imagery using "non-realistic" visual images. This comparison not only reveals the differences in the expressive forms of the two artists but also reflects their different understandings and expressions of the concept of abstraction.

4. The Temporal Interpretation of Schema in Richter's Works

4.1. The Enigmatic Enlightenment

Gerhard Richter was born in 1932 into a bourgeois family in Dresden, where his father was a teacher and a talented pianist, and his mother was the daughter of a pianist, with the family possessing a profound cultivation in the fields of art and philosophy. However, the outbreak of World War II altered the family's destiny. Richter's father was conscripted and captured by the American forces during the war. After the war, he returned home in 1946, but as a former Nazi party member, he lost his position as a teacher, and the family faced social ostracism and isolation.

Benefitting from the artistic influence of his family, at the age of 16 in 1948, Richter decided to leave the traditional education system to apprentice with professional painters, beginning his career as an art apprentice and a staff painter at a theater. In 1951, he entered the Dresden Art Academy to systematically master academic painting skills. In 1958, a serendipitous exhibition visit—the diversity of modern art and the infectious power of abstract art at the Kassel Documenta—had a profound impact on him, making him realize the inclusive environment of West Germany for artistic nourishment.

In 1961, before the construction of the Berlin Wall, Richter left Dresden with his wife and fled to West Germany, settling in Düsseldorf, where he continued his artistic studies at the art academy there. This transition marked not only a significant personal life decision but also the beginning of a new chapter in his artistic career.



Figure 4. <Table>, 1962, Richter. <https://www.gerhard-richter.com/>

Gerhard Richter's artistic career began with special significance. The first work recorded in his complete collection is "Table" (<Figure 4>), for which Richter stated: "On the one hand, after leaving East Germany, I wanted to have a completely new start; on the other hand, after arriving in West Germany, I created many works, including some photo-paintings, and I wanted to mark a clear boundary with my past creations. Therefore, I decided to take 'Table' as the starting point of my work records."^[9] The photographic prototype of this work originated from the Italian design magazine "Domus." In an interview, Richter mentioned that he was initially dissatisfied with the accumulation of pigments in the painting, so he repainted it, only to unexpectedly discover an effect that satisfied him, and thus decided to preserve this effect.^[10] Before the repainting, this work was a figurative reproduction with some "photographic" stereotypes; after repainting, it seemed to present an abstract state in the out-of-focus and distorted photos, triggering a non-figurative schematic association and producing a characteristic that he liked.

At the age of thirty, Richter once abandoned his old works, hoping to find a completely new creative language. However, his choice of "photo" painting shows that although he wanted to bid farewell to the past, the seeds of memory and culture had already taken root in his heart, internalized into intangible conceptual schemas. Richter believes in the authenticity of the photo but negates it in his works. This conflict and integration of artistic concepts and painting skills allowed him to quickly find his own painting language and conceptual motivation in the accident, which he has continued to use to this day.



Figure 5. <Untitled>, 1966, Richter.

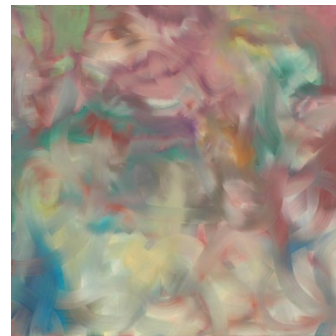


Figure 6. <Colour Streaks>, 1968, Richter.

<https://www.gerhard-richter.com/>

In a letter to Welland, Richter described his creative process: "Every time I am alone, this place turns into chaos. The entire floor is covered with cut-out magazine illustrations from which I discovered a new trick; I cut out images from illustrated magazines and treated them with chemical products to fix, rub, and blur them."^[11] He had an affinity for magazines with a combination of text and images, perhaps due to their documentary-like realism, and was curious about the future trajectory of this method of creation. In the 1960s, he sought clues to break through his own limitations through chance, as seen in <Figure 5, 6>, where this element of randomness is reflected in the subject matter and creative methods of his works. Richter's works are born from cycles of destruction and reconstruction, with the accidental abstraction and derived schemas providing a template for his later

photo-paintings. Since then, most of his works have continued in this conceptual schematic style.

4.2. *The Blurry Truth*

Gerhard Richter's works handle the canvas with an almost detached manner, regardless of how intense the subject matter and political metaphors may be. His works take on various forms, including abstract, figurative, and expressive styles, yet they consistently weave an illusion of a bystander's perspective, a viewpoint that seems to maintain a subtle distance from the truth behind the images. This conceptual schema deeply attracts researchers because it guides them to match vague memories with non-figurative shapes and to explore how to express the emotional value of memories through non-figurative forms.

In his 1965 work "Aunt Marianne" (<Figure 8>), Richter employed a "blurring" technique to dissipate the details of the photograph. When we observe this piece from an aesthetic projection perspective, the realistic representational schema seems to emerge, allowing us to easily recognize the depicted character and the vaguely outlined forest in the background. However, once this speculative perceptual schema is established, Richter leads the viewer's vision to gradually lose focus through the blurring of the image, causing the photographic image to be gradually forgotten. He directs the conceptual schema towards an illusory unknown realm, ultimately entering the unique memory crafted by Richter.

Compared to a clear photograph (<Figure 7>), Richter's hazy painting (<Figure 8>) seems to resonate more with the viewer's memory. The more specific the image represented by the photograph, the less room there is for the imagination of recollection. Ultimately, for viewers who are "outsiders" and do not understand the truth behind the work, the clearer the image, the fewer categories of schema may be generated.



Figure 7. <Aunt Marianne>, photograph.



Figure 8. <Aunt Marianne>, 1965, Richter.

<https://www.gerhard-richter.com/>

When viewers delve into the true stories behind Gerhard Richter's works, their aesthetic experience and the emotional projection that arises from it undergo a transformation. This transformation allows for a deeper understanding of the profound meaning contained in the work "Aunt Marianne" (<Figure 8>), which is marked as the 'responsibility of the artist after Auschwitz'.^[12] The little girl in the painting is Richter's aunt Marianne, and Richter has stated that the painting was created to commemorate the victims of the Nazi 'eugenics' policy. 'Eugenics' was a political activity carried out by the Nazis to 'purify' the 'superior' German genes by exterminating other races, people with disabilities, and those with mental illnesses. His aunt Marianne was a victim of this program, confined to a mental institution, subjected to forced sterilization, and ultimately tortured to death in 1945. Richter created this painting 20 years later, capturing the gentle smile and warm moment of the little girl in an extremely calm manner, creating a memory where warmth and pain coexist.

Researchers believe that the difference between this emotional schema and the visual schema mentioned earlier is precisely the alienation created by Richter, as well as the distance from the truth. Ironically, Richter later discovered that among those responsible for his aunt's death was also his father-in-law, Heinrich Oifenger.

4.3. *The Reality of Facts*

Gerhard Richter's work "Dead" (<Figure 9>) utilizes photographic material sourced from a 1963

article in "Quick" magazine titled "Three Lives Abandoned by a Ship" (<Figure 10>). The report narrates the story of a ship that sank off Long Island and vanished under mysterious circumstances, with three bodies washed ashore and the other six sailors remaining unaccounted for. Richter stated in 2010: "I did not want to paint a report on a specific disaster, but rather, through a concrete case, I wanted to explore the universally present, inexplicable, and unconscious natural deaths." In this piece, he depicted a pair of awkward feet in an innocent and romantic manner. Although he once considered abandoning the painting, an indescribable force always guided him back to that day. ^[13]

Richter's approach to "Dead" exemplifies his commitment to exploring the boundaries between representation and abstraction, reality and perception. The work stands as a testament to his belief in the power of art to evoke complex emotions and provoke thought on the part of the viewer. By capturing a moment of raw humanity, Richter has created a work that transcends the specific circumstances of the shipwreck and speaks to the broader human experience.



Figure 9. <Dead>, 1963, Richter.



Figure 10. 'Quick' magazine, 1963.

Schneede U. M, Butin H, Elger D, Rübél D, Westheider O, et al. Gerhard Richter Images of an Era[M]. Hirmer Publishers, Munich copublished by Heni Publishing. 2011:21.

Richter believes that while photographs can reveal fragments of truth, they cannot fully disclose the entirety of the complex relationship between memory and humanity. There are aspects of memories and emotions in life that are unspeakable and require expression through conceptual schemas. His work "Dead" (<Figure 9>) presents a glacial image through a perceptual visual approach, conveying Richter's calm treatment of the subject and the sense of vicissitudes in memory expressed through hazy and gray tones. This technique not only reflects Richter's understanding and contemplation of the permeation of life force but also skillfully reconciles the "facts" of reality with the "facts" of conception through schema.

When the images from the magazine photos are absent, viewers construct a purposeful imagination with the help of the perceptual schema of painting. However, when the truth of the facts emerges, this imagination quickly collapses and shifts towards the perception of "facts" in reality. This indicates that Richter's works are not merely representations of reality; they are also profound reflections on the relationship between the viewer's inner world, memory, and truth.

5. Colorful Memories

Gerhard Richter employs a technique of blurring in his paintings, creating a visual effect that seems out of focus. This language of ambiguity is not only a notable characteristic of his work but also reflects a stance of detachment that runs through his entire artistic practice. When such accidentally occurring schematic concepts become templates for creation, Richter's selection of photographs and his creative methods become more diverse and free.

In works (<Figure 11, 12>), Richter boldly smears within the photographs, breaking the perceptual schemas of realistic scenes and guiding viewers to experience a blurred sensation between the figurative and the abstract during the process of schema correction. Although at the intellectual level, the conceptual schema of the "painting" as an object prompts people to explore explicit symbols within the work, the mottled colors in (<Figure 11>) and the natural relationship between the objective and the imagined in (<Figure 12>) both bring about an illusion of the passage of time visualized.



Figure 11. <6.6>, 1988, Richter.

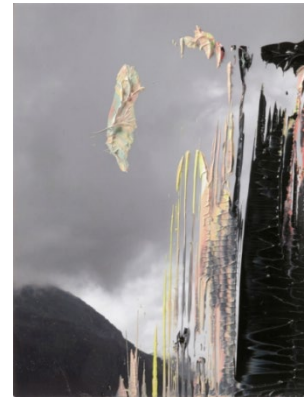


Figure 12. <Juni>, 2016, Richter.

<https://www.gerhard-richter.com/>

It is precisely based on this element of chance and the detached standpoint of an outsider that Richter has developed a painting language without any preconceived formal notions. When labeled as a social art critic, he believes this to be overly reductive, narrowing the perspective of the viewer. Richter emphasizes the necessity of maintaining uncertainty, just as life itself is uncertain. His exploration of the authenticity of life and his embrace of uncertainty are reflected in his series of abstract works, such as <Figure 13, 14>. It is worth mentioning that even in abstract artworks, this conceptual schema of visual ambiguity continues to exist.

Richter once stated: "This is a period when people are creating works that strive to depict the essence of society, but I do not want to do anything related to this. For this reason, I reject any form of direct contemporary reference. I just want to indulge in tranquility, not binding myself to any constraints, but focusing solely on my work, seeking to express everything I want to convey." [14]



Figure 13. <Abstract Painting>, 1990, Richter. Figure 14. <Abstract Painting>, 2005, Richter.

<https://www.gerhard-richter.com/>

Researchers, drawing from Richter's life recollections and experiences, attribute a profound poetic quality to the blurred forms in his work. Richter gazes upon the world with a detached perspective; his art does not judge the merits of memory itself but instead creates an intermediate realm between the vague and the clear. This ambiguity may stem from his intrinsic rejection of war and his understanding of the illusory aspects of life. As Richter himself stated: "The question of a false life would have to be framed by a thinking of life as surviving, living on, a survival that finds itself inheriting a haunting set of legacies that cannot be fully understood." [15] In his works, the dichotomy of good and evil in human nature is dissolved, beauty and ugliness are balanced, and truth and illusion coexist in reconciliation.

Richter's poetic spirit treats all experiences on life's journey with equanimity. He conceals his emotions within his works, without attempting to solve the enigmas of existence. He respects the objective truth of photographs while simultaneously questioning it through his art. In this manner, Richter's artistic creation transcends mere representation of reality, delving deeper into the exploration of human cognition, emotions, and the spiritual realm.

6. Conclusion

When we regard Gerhard Richter's works as pure conceptual "schemas," what we experience is not merely the examination of a series of static images but a dynamic aesthetic process. In this process, the viewer transcends the concreteness of the physical image, engaging in a profound dialogue with the artwork. This dialogue surpasses mere visual intuition, touching upon emotional resonance and intellectual exchange, thereby affording us a deeper level of experience and understanding in the aesthetic process.

Through subjective aesthetic inclinations, the viewer reconstructs a schema on a spiritual plane. This schema serves both as a manifestation of the viewer's memory and an extension of poetic imagination, carrying with it a transcendental quality. This transcendence is entirely contingent upon the internal dynamics of the viewer and the temporal dialogue between the subject and the artwork.

Richter's visual abstraction should not be simplistically understood as a rejection of realism but should be seen as a profound form of "re-presentation." This re-presentation is a reinterpretation and internal expression of reality. Within the framework of Kant's schema theory, we recognize how the artist employs an abstract language in his work to explore more complex realities and inner worlds. It is not just a representation of the external world but also a reflection of the artist's inner world and a touchstone for the viewer's spiritual realm.

Schema theory reveals the mediating role between intellectual concepts and sensory intuition. In the artist's creation, the schema is a tool of subjective thinking, aiding them in reinterpreting sensory materials. In the viewer's appreciation, the schema is a vessel of personal experience, guiding them in schematizing the artwork.

Thus, we can conclude that Richter's artistic works are not only visual abstractions but also spiritual schemas. They are a means for us to understand the world, feel life, and explore our inner selves. Through Kant's schema theory, we gain insight into the complexity of artistic creation and appreciation, comprehending how artworks circulate among different subjects and reveal rich connotations. Artworks become bridges connecting different spiritual worlds, showcasing the artist's creative intentions while also stimulating the viewer's emotions and thoughts, together forming a diverse, open, and interactive system of art appreciation.

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