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October, Vol. 88. (Spring, 1999), pp. 117-145.

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Gerhard Richter's *Atlas*: The Anomic Archive*

BENJAMIN H. D. BUCHLOH

What the photographs by their sheer accumulation attempt to banish is the recollection of death, which is part and parcel of every memory image. In the illustrated magazines the world has become a photographable present and the photographed present has been entirely eternalized. Seemingly ripped from the clutch of death, in reality it has succumbed to it.

—Siegfried Kracauer, "Photography" (1927)

In the exact duplication of the Real, preferably by means of another reproductive medium—advertisement, photography, etc.—and in the shift from medium to medium, the real vanishes and it becomes an allegory of death. But even in its moment of destruction it exposes and affirms itself, it will become the quintessential real and it becomes the fetishism of the lost object.

—Jean Baudrillard, *L'Echange symbolique et la mort* (1976)

Gerhard Richter's *Atlas* is one of several structurally similar yet rather different projects undertaken by a number of European artists from the early to the mid 1960s whose formal procedures of accumulating found or intentionally produced photographs in more or less regular grid formations (one could also think of the forty-year-long collection of typologies of industrial architecture by Bernhard and Hilla Becher begun in 1958, or the work of Christian Boltanski begun in the late 1960s) have remained strangely enigmatic. These projects are notable either for their astonishing homogeneity and continuity (as is the case with the work of the Bechers) or for the equally remarkable heterogeneity and discontinuity that defines Richter's *Atlas*.

* This essay was published in an earlier and significantly different version in the exhibition catalog *Deep Storage: Collecting, Storing and Archiving in Art*, ed. Ingrid Schaffner and Andreas Winzen (Munich: Prestel Verlag, 1998). The version published here constitutes the first part of a chapter on Gerhard Richter's *Atlas* from my forthcoming monograph on the artist.

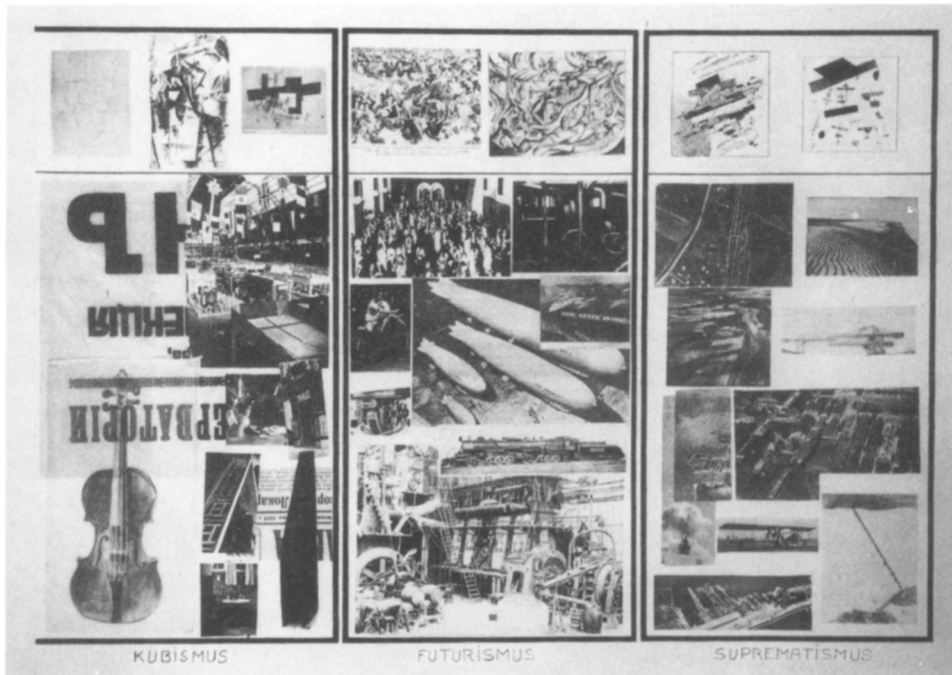
Having taken as the principles of a given work's formal organization photography's innate structural order (its condition as archive) in conjunction with its seemingly infinite multiplicity, capacity for serialization, and aspiration toward comprehensive totality, such projects share a condition of being unclassifiable within the typology and terminology of avant-garde art history. Neither the term *collage* nor *photomontage* adequately describe the apparent formal and iconographic monotony of these panels or the vast archival accumulations of their materials.

Yet, at the same time, the descriptive terms and genres from the more specialized history of photography—all of them operative in one way or another in Richter's *Atlas*—appear equally inadequate to classify these image accumulations. Despite the first impression that the *Atlas* might give, the discursive order of this photographic collection cannot be identified either with the private album of the amateur or with the cumulative projects of documentary photography. Nor can we argue that the exactitude of topographical or architectural photography or the massive image apparatus of surveillance and spectacularization operative in photojournalism govern the peculiar “photographic condition” of Richter's *Atlas*. Lastly, in spite of their frequent appearance among the genres present in the *Atlas*, not even advertising or fashion photography and their principles of fetishization determine the reading of these panels.

By contrast, what does come to mind are the terms used to describe instructional charts, teaching devices, technical and scientific illustrations found in textbooks and catalogues, and the archival organization of materials according to the principles of an as yet unidentifiable discipline. However, avant-garde history seems to have few, if any, precedents for artistic procedures that systematically organize knowledge as didactic models of display or as mnemonic devices. Possible candidates for such precedents—such as the teaching panels produced by Kasimir Malevich between 1924 and 1927 to illustrate the theoretical efforts of the Institute of Artistic Culture in Leningrad—are generally considered to be mere supplements to the actual aesthetic objects they are meant to explain.¹ This is also the case with another crucial example: Hannah Höch's media *Scrapbook*, which the artist produced around 1933.² Höch's project distinctly points toward

1. For a complete documentation of the teaching panels by Malevich and his collaborators, see Troels Andersen, *Malevich: Catalogue Raisonné of the Berlin Exhibition 1927* (Amsterdam: Stedelijk Museum, 1970).

2. Maud Lavin has given us the most comprehensive description and discussion of Höch's scrapbook in her monographic study *Cut with the Kitchen Knife* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1993), pp. 711–21. Yet Lavin does not even attempt to address the contradictions that become apparent in her own discussion when she continuously refers to the scrapbook as a photomontage project only to assert at the same time that it differs in many unfathomable ways from photomontage proper. This unresolved ambiguity becomes most apparent in Lavin's final statement about the scrapbook: “But the strongest impression one gets from looking through Höch's scrapbook is that it is a collection compiled for her own intense visual, sensual and spiritual pleasure. This private view differs from the representations in Höch's public and more critical photomontages, and as such the scrapbook can be considered as a mediation between the presentations of the Weimar mass media and the exhibition displays of one avant-gardist” (p. 120).



Kasimir Malevich. Painterly Sensations and Their Environment
(Cubism, Futurism, Suprematism Chart no. 16). 1925–26.

the earlier existence of a variety of artistic strategies that attempted to accommodate large quantities of found photographs and to organize them in an archival manner. Rather than deploying fragmentation and fissure, the dynamic principles of photomontage that Höch had practiced in the late teens, her subsequent decision to foreground photography's archival order seemed instead to be probing its continuing mnemonic competence in the face of an ascendant media culture.

But in general, the didactic and mnemonic tracing of historical processes, the establishment of typologies, chronologies, and temporal continuities—even if only fictitious, as in Boltanski's case—have always seemed to conflict with the avant-garde's self-perception as providing instantaneous presence, shock, and perceptual rupture.

Excursus on the Atlas

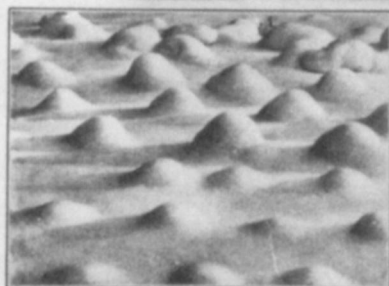
The term *atlas* has a more familiar ring in the German language, perhaps, than it does in English. From the end of the sixteenth century it was defined as a book format that compiles and organizes geographical and astronomical knowledge. We are told that this format received its name from one of Mercator's map collections in 1585, which bore a frontispiece showing the image of Atlas, the Titan of Greek mythology, who holds up the pillars of the universe at the threshold where day and night meet each other. But later, in the nineteenth century, the term was increasingly deployed in German to identify any tabular display of systematized



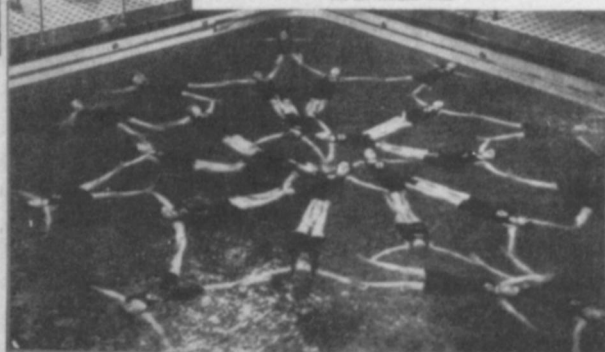
Die Arbeiter im
Cappellraum des Plana-
toriums der Stadt Berlin



Die Tänzerin als Schilddrüse: Genta Fern in einem neuartigen
Schattenspiel in der neuen Berlin-Arena.
Foto von Alexander Kohn.



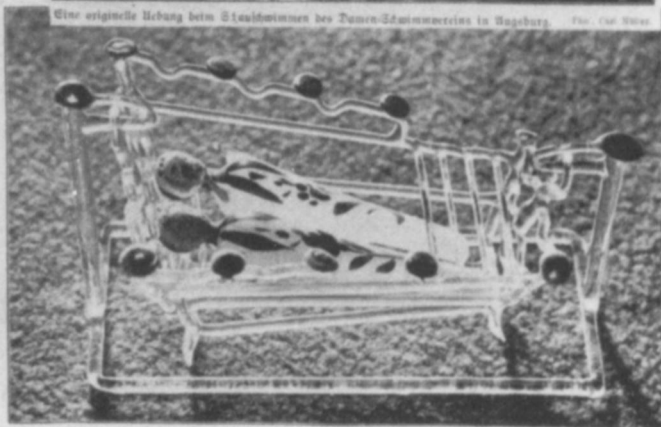
Es ist eine schriftliche Übung



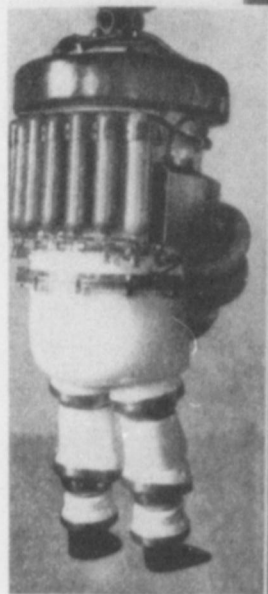
Eine originelle Übung beim Tauchschwimmen des Damen-Schwimmvereins in Hamburg. Foto Carl Wenz



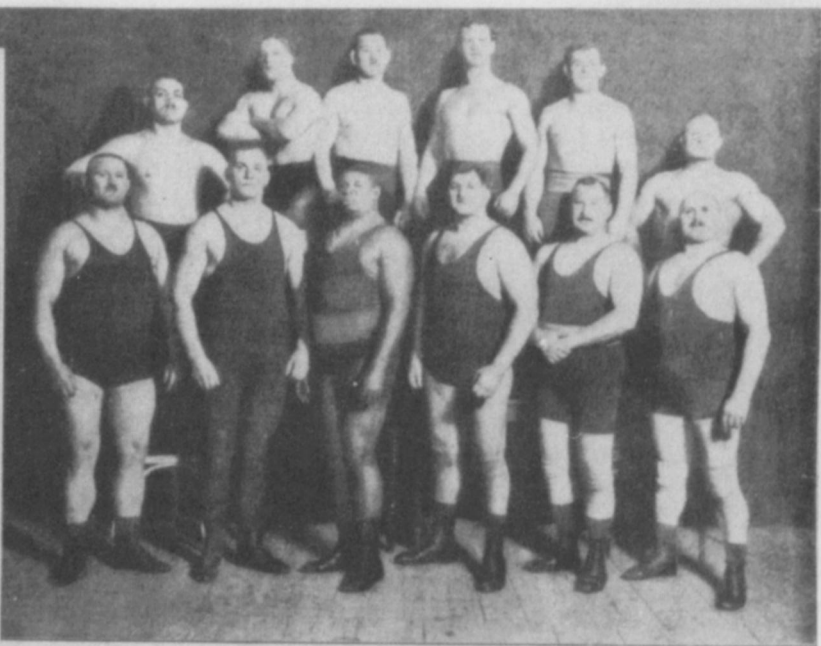
Abb. 9: Der Mann mit der Riesenhand
Wenn man mit der Kamera das Ding zu nahe sieht, kann man ganz
ganz andere Perspektiven erzielen



Die gläserne Wanne, ein „Sonnen-Spielzeug“

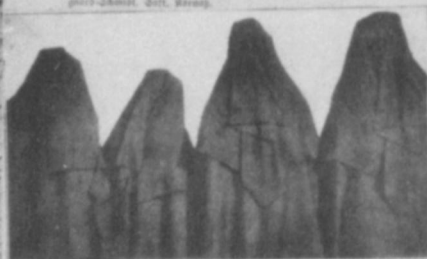
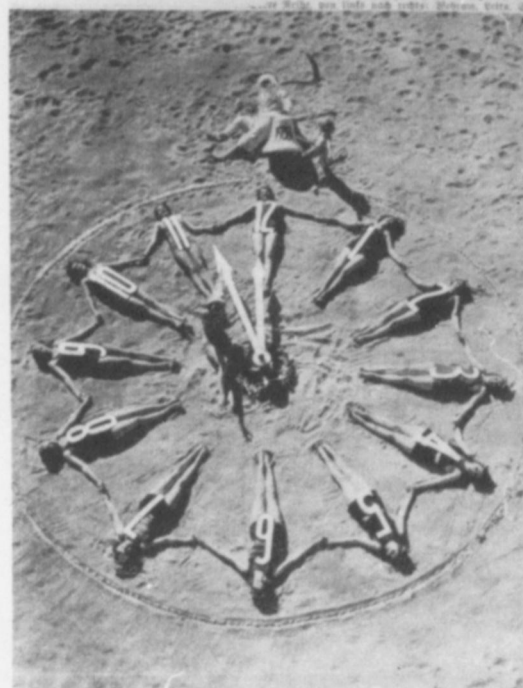


Alte Reissner-Hausmann



Einige der hervorragendsten Teilnehmer an der Ringkampf-Wettbewerbsveranstaltung im Reichs-Theater in Berlin

Oben: Reissner-Hausmann, Reissner-Hausmann, Reissner-Hausmann, Reissner-Hausmann, Reissner-Hausmann, Reissner-Hausmann, Reissner-Hausmann, Reissner-Hausmann, Reissner-Hausmann, Reissner-Hausmann, Reissner-Hausmann



Miniaturnachbau

knowledge, so that one could have encountered an atlas in almost all fields of empirical science: an atlas of astronomy, anatomy, geography, or ethnography. Later, even schoolbooks charting plants and animals carried that name the way the god had carried the pillars. With the confidence in empiricism and the aspiration toward comprehensive completeness of positivist systems of knowledge having withered in the twentieth century, the term atlas seems to have fallen into a more metaphorical usage.

Aby Warburg's Mnemosyne Atlas

We encounter the most important example of this anti-positivist tendency around 1927, in a monumental project that sets out to gather identifiable forms of collective memory. The *Mnemosyne Atlas* was first conceived by the art historian Aby Warburg in 1925 after his release from Ludwig Binswanger's psychiatric clinic in 1924; it was actively developed in 1928 and he continued it until his death in 1929. Even though the scholar had to leave the project behind in an unfinished state, more than sixty panels with over one thousand photographs had been assembled by Warburg. According to his aspirations as recorded in his diaries, the *Mnemosyne Atlas* was to construct a model of the mnemonic in which Western European humanist thought would once more, perhaps for the last time, recognize its origins and trace its latent continuities into the present, ranging spatially across the confines of European humanist culture and situating itself temporally within the parameters of European history from classical antiquity to the present.³

While collective social memory, according to Warburg, could be traced through the various layers of cultural transmission (his primary focus being the transformation of "dynamograms" transferred from classical antiquity to Renaissance painting, the reoccurring motifs of gesture and bodily expression that he had identified in his notorious term "pathos formulas"), Warburg more specifically argued that his attempt to construct collective historical memory would focus on the inextricable link between the mnemonic and the traumatic.

3. Soon thereafter, in a crucial text from 1931, Walter Benjamin's "Short History of Photography," the scope of the term *atlas* is once again strangely modified for the purposes of contemporary needs (in an almost ominous prognosis of the needs of the future), when Benjamin discusses August Sander's *Antlitz der Zeit* (1929), the key work of the German Neue Sachlichkeit photographer, as an "Übungsatlas." Eerily anticipating that only a few years later physiognomic observation would not only serve as the pretext to political discrimination but more brutally as the pseudoscientific legitimization of racist persecution, this exercise manual, as Benjamin optimistically claims, will educate its viewers in the physiognomic study of the relationships between the class identity of the depicted sitters and their political and ideological affiliations in the imminent future. Benjamin states: "Work like Sander's could overnight assume unlooked-for topicality. Sudden shifts of power such as are now overdue in our society can make the ability to read facial types a matter of vital importance. Whether one is of the left or right, one will have to get used to being looked at in terms of one's provenance. And one will have to look at others in the same way. Sander's work is more than a picture book. It is a training manual [*Übungsatlas*: literally an atlas of exercise]" (Benjamin, *One-Way Street*, trans. Edmund Jephcott [London: New Left Books, 1979], p. 252).



*Aby Warburg. Panel 55 of
Mnemosyne Atlas. 1928-29.*

Thus, in the unpublished introduction to his *Mnemosyne Atlas* he wrote that it is in the area of orgiastic mass seizure that one should look for the mint that stamps the expression of extreme emotional paroxysm on the memory with such intensity that the encryptions of that experience of suffering live on, an inheritance preserved in the memory.⁴ While this introduction to the project retrospectively reads like an uncanny prognosis of the imminent future of social behavior, Warburg evidently hoped to construct—even if for the last time—a model of historical memory and continuity of experience, before both would be shattered by the catastrophic destruction of humanist civilization at the hands of German Fascism.

But, at least according to its author's intentions, by collecting photographic reproductions of a broad variety of practices of representation, the *Atlas* was also to achieve the materialist project of constructing social memory. In this sense Warburg's *Atlas* reiterated his lifelong challenge to the rigid and hierarchical compartmentalization of the discipline of art history through an attempt to abolish its methods and categories of exclusively formal or stylistic description. Yet in its erosion of the disciplinary boundaries between the conventions and the studies of high art and mass culture, the *Atlas* also questioned whether, under the universal reign of photographic reproduction, mnemonic experience could even continue to be constructed. In this way the *Atlas* was also establishing both the theoretical and the presentational framework to probe the competence of the mnemonic from which Höch's scrapbook would emerge a few years later.

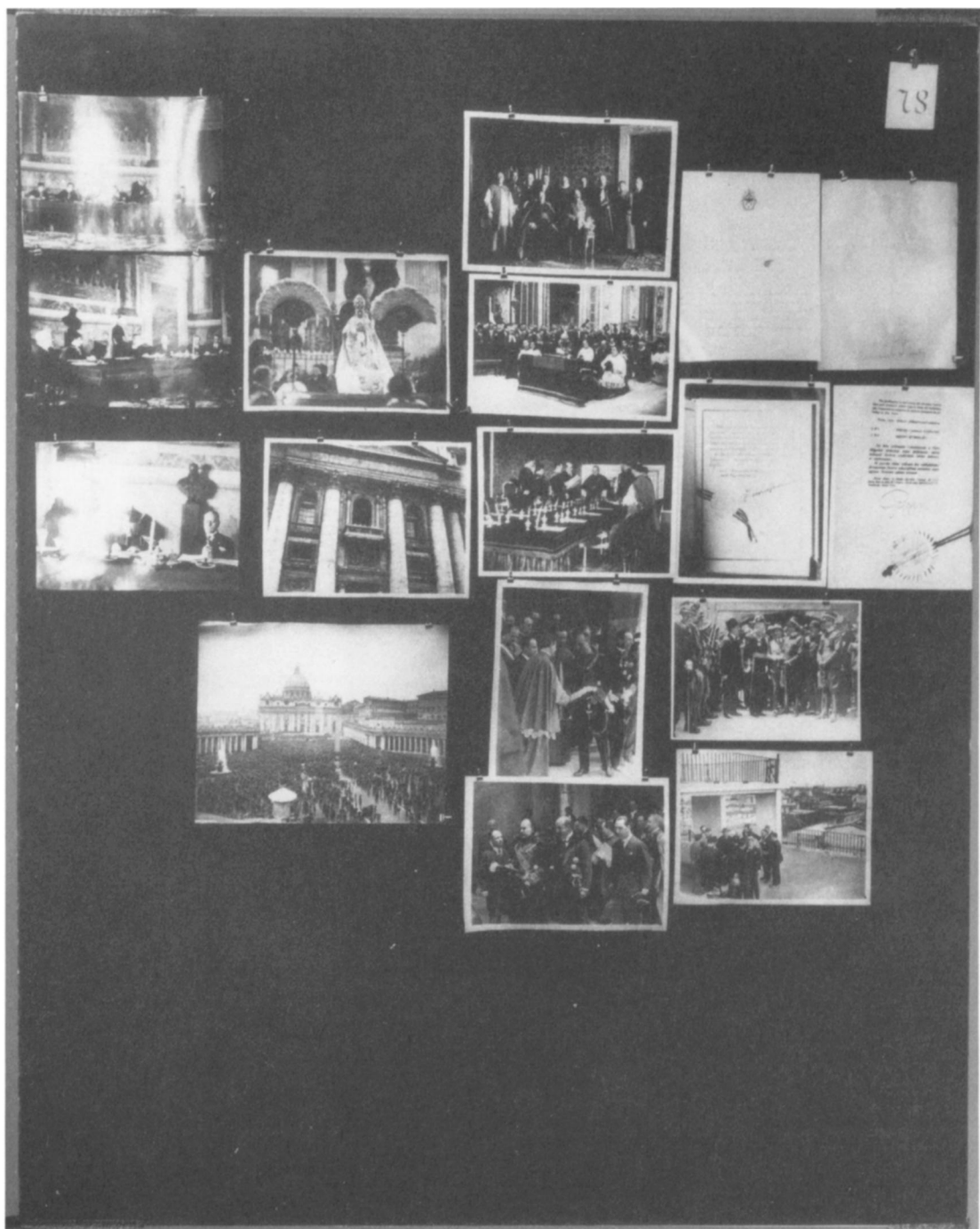
Kurt Forster, the editor of the forthcoming English edition of Warburg's writings, describes the arrangement as follows:

There, cheek by jowl, were late antique reliefs, secular manuscripts, monumental frescoes, postage stamps, broadsides, pictures cut out of magazines, and old master drawings. It becomes apparent, if only at second glance, that this unorthodox selection is the product of an extraordinary command of a vast field.⁵

It seems, at least at first reading, that in Warburg's project we encounter an almost Benjaminian trust in the universally emancipatory functions of technological reproduction and dissemination. Thus, the extreme temporal and spatial heterogeneity of the *Atlas*'s subjects is juxtaposed with the paradoxical homogeneity of their simultaneous presence in the space of the photographic, anticipating the subsequent abstraction from historical context and social function in the name of a universal aesthetic experience by André Malraux in his *Le Musée Imaginaire*. This condition alone seems—at first sight at least—to situate the *Mnemosyne Atlas* in a

4. Aby Warburg, "Introduction to *Mnemosyne Atlas*," Warburg Archive, No. 102.1.1.6; quoted in Mathew Rampley, "Mimesis and Modernity: Aby Warburg and Walter Benjamin," unpublished manuscript.

5. Kurt Forster, "Die Hamburg Amerika Linie oder Warburg's Kunstwissenschaft zwischen den Kontinenten," in *Aby Warburg: Akten des Internationalen Symposiums*, ed. Horst Bredekamp, Michael Diers, and Charlotte Schoell-Glass (Weinheim: Acta Humaniora, 1991), pp. 11–37.



*Warburg. Panel 78 of
Mnemosyne Atlas.*



Warburg. Panel 79 of
Mnemosyne Atlas.

peculiar parallelism to the artistic practices of the historical avant-garde of the 1920s as well. Not surprisingly, this argument has in fact been made by numerous Warburg scholars, notably by Wolfgang Kemp, Werner Hofmann, and most recently and emphatically by Forster himself in his two essays on Warburg's methods. Thus, for example, he states that

[in] terms of technique Warburg's panels belong with the montage procedures of Schwitters and Lissitzky. Needless to say, this analogy implies no claim to artistic merit on the part of the Warburg panels; nor does it invalidate that of Schwitters' and Lissitzky's collages: it simply serves to redefine graphic montage as the construction of meanings rather than the arrangement of forms.⁶

It is this remark (and many similar ones by the Warburg scholars mentioned), in particular its intriguing and surprisingly clear-cut opposition between a "construction of meanings" (supposedly Warburg's) and an "arrangement of forms" (supposedly that of Schwitters and Lissitzky), that poses other questions. First of all, one would want to ask whether any aspects of Warburg's *Atlas* can in fact be productively compared to the collage and photomontage techniques of the 1920s, or whether we can understand more about either side of this problematic comparison by differentiating them more rigorously and—most importantly for our project—by recognizing that the *Atlas* in fact established a cultural model of probing the possibilities of historical memory whose agenda was profoundly different from its activist precursors in the field of photomontage.

Another question would be whether it could in fact be potentially productive to compare Warburg's *Atlas* with Richter's *Atlas*, as a further example of such a mnemonic project. We would have to recognize from the outset that while both projects obviously address the possibilities of mnemonic experience, they operate under dramatically different historical circumstances: the former at the onset of a traumatic destruction of historical memory, the moment of the most devastating cataclysm of human history brought about by German Fascism, the latter looking back at its aftermath from a position of repression and disavowal, attempting to reconstruct remembrance from within the social and geopolitical space of the very society that inflicted trauma.⁷

Structures of an Atlas

Wolfgang Kemp was the first to point out that Warburg's project of an organization and presentation of vast quantities of historical information without

6. Ibid., p. 31.

7. Joseph Koerner has suggested in a moving essay on Warburg that the rise of Nazi Fascism in Germany at the time would have in fact had a tremendous impact on the orientation (or disorientation) of Warburg's personal and professional life as early as the outbreak of his illness. See Joseph Koerner, "Aby Warburg among the Hopis: Paleface and Redskin," *The New Republic*, March 24, 1997, pp. 30–38.

any textual commentary might well remind us of Surrealist montage procedures.⁸ Inevitably thereby, Warburg's *Atlas* also enters into a comparison with another extraordinary and unfinished montage project of the late 1920s, a textual assemblage that had attempted to construct an analytical memory of collective experience in nineteenth-century Paris. Benjamin had similarly associated his *Passagenwerk* with the montage techniques of the Surrealists and had explicitly identified it in those terms when he wrote that the "method of this work is literary montage. I have nothing to say, only to show."⁹

And Theodor W. Adorno's description of the *Passagenwerk* could just as well be addressing the essential features of Warburg's *Mnemosyne Atlas*: "Benjamin's intention was to eliminate all overt commentary and to have the meanings emerge solely through a shocking montage of the material. . . . The culmination of his anti-subjectivism, his major work was to consist solely of citations."¹⁰

Again, several terms stand out in Kemp's and Adorno's discussions that deserve our attention, both with regard to the accuracy of the descriptions of Benjamin's and Warburg's models (including the differences between them), and with regard to the accuracy of their definition of the epistemes of collage/photomontage. First of all, there is the assumption of the exclusion of interpretation in favor of actually existing conditions in the discursive construction of textual memory. Second, there is the anticipation of shock as an inescapable and intended result of montage technique, presumably occurring most vividly in the interstices between discursive fields (such as the pictorial versus the photographic, the clutter of mass culture versus the avant-garde's striving for structural distillation, the artisanal versus the technically reproduced, the scriptural versus the painterly—to name but a few of the classical *topoi* and tropes of collage and montage aesthetics).

Third, and crucially, it is Adorno's observation of anti-subjectivism as the driving force of the collage/photomontage aesthetic that presumably articulates a systematic critique of what would later come to be called "the author function" of a text. Finally, and directly connected with the preceding term, there is Adorno's emphasis on the accumulation of citations as paralleling the newly emergent structuring device of montage aesthetics. If this initially occurs in photomontage itself, where it displaces the homogeneity of the conception and execution of painting, soon thereafter the montage technique would also transform literary or filmic aesthetics (those of the Soviet Union in particular), as for example in the factographic novel where it came to displace authorial omniscience, narrative, and fiction. Thus one could argue that by the mid-1920s a variety of homologous

8. Wolfgang Kemp, "Benjamin und Aby Warburg," *Kritische Berichte* 3, no. 1 (1975), p. 5ff.

9. Walter Benjamin, "Das Passagenwerk," in *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 5, ed. Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1972–89), p. 574.

10. Theodor W. Adorno, "A Portrait of Walter Benjamin," in *Prisms*, trans. Samuel and Shierry Weber (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1981), p. 239.

new models for writing and imaging historical accounts emerged simultaneously, ranging from the montage techniques of artistic practices to Warburg's *Atlas* or those of the *Annales* historians.

In all of these projects (literary, artistic, filmic, historical) a post-humanist and post-bourgeois subjectivity is constituted. The telling of history as a sequence of events acted out by individual agents is displaced by a focus on the simultaneity of separate but contingent social frameworks and an infinity of participating agents, and the process of history is reconceived as a structural system of perpetually changing interactions and permutations between economic and ecological givens, class formations and their ideologies, and the resulting types of social and cultural interactions specific to each particular moment.¹¹

Even if Warburg's *Atlas* was in fact part of a newly emerging cultural paradigm of montage as a new process of writing a decentered history and constructing mnemonic forms accordingly, any comparison between Warburg and the montage techniques of the artistic avant-gardes, let alone the neo-avant-garde, will remain highly problematic if such a comparison does not recognize first of all the actual discontinuities within the collage/photomontage model itself. These internal shifts and breaks in the paradigm had already emerged in the late 1920s, and these changes would become especially decisive in the paradigm's rediscovery in postwar practices. Furthermore, any attempt at a comparative reading of the structurally comparable projects will have to develop an equally differentiated understanding of the contradictions and changes that already emerged in the 1920s in the definitions of photographic functions themselves, both in the theoretical approaches to photography in Weimar Germany and the Soviet Union and in the artistic practices deploying photography in both countries. More specifically, and particularly important for our discussion of Warburg's and Richter's mnemonic project, is the fact that at the very moment of its elaboration, opposite theorizations of photography had collided precisely on the question of the impact of the photographic image on the construction of historical memory.

This dialectic is evident in the positions articulated in 1927–28. On the one hand, we have to consider Siegfried Kracauer's epochal essay on photography which argues that photographic production devastates the memory image, a position that implies (most likely unbeknownst to both) a severe critical challenge to Warburg's conception of the *Atlas* as a model of the construction of social memory. On the opposite end of the spectrum, one would have to take into account the famous "photography debate" of the Soviet Union as it emerges around 1927, primarily in the writings of the Soviet theorists and artists Ossip Brik, Boris Kushner, and Alexander Rodchenko. And third, one would have to consider what remains probably the most important essay on photography of the first half of the

11. Not surprisingly, then, the parallels between the *Annales* historian Marc Bloch and Aby Warburg have been discussed. See Ulrich Raulff, "Parallel gelesen: Die Schriften von Aby Warburg und Marc Bloch zwischen 1914 und 1924," in *Aby Warburg: Akten des Internationalen Symposiums*, pp. 167–78.



*Alexander Rodchenko. Maquette for an illustration for
About This (Pro eto), a poem by Vladimir Mayakovsky. 1923.*

twentieth century, written shortly after Warburg's project was interrupted: Walter Benjamin's 1931 "Short History of Photography," which argues against the media pessimism of Kracauer's essay in favor of a new media culture of politically motivated montage.

To sketch out these oppositions only in the briefest terms entails pointing first of all to the latent dichotomy operative in collage/montage aesthetics from their inception. The poles of opposition could be called the order of perceptual shock and the principle of estrangement on the one hand, and the order of the statistical collection or the archive on the other. The structural emphasis on discontinuity and fragmentation in the initial phase of Dada-derived photomontage introduced the subject's perceptual field to the "shock" experiences of daily existence in advanced industrial culture. While the metonymic procedures of photomontage and their continuous emphasis on the fissure and the fragment—at least in their initial appearance—operated to dismantle the myths of unity and totality that advertising and ideology consistently inscribe on their consumers, photomontage paradoxically collaborated also in the social project of perceptual modernization and its affirmative agenda. But this revolutionary effect of the semiotic upheaval of poetic shock and estrangement was short-lived. Already in the second moment of Dada collage (at the time of Hannah Höch's *Meine Haussprüche* [1922]), for example, the heterogeneity of random order and the arbitrary juxtapositions of found objects and images with their sense of a fundamental cognitive and perceptual anomie were challenged as either apolitical and anti-communicative, or as esoteric and aestheticist. The very avant-garde artists who initiated photomontage (e.g., Heartfield, Höch, Klucis, Lissitzky, and Rodchenko) now diagnosed this anomic character of the Dadaist collage/montage technique as bourgeois avant-gardism, mounting a critique that called, paradoxically, for a reintroduction of the dimensions of narrative, communicative action, and instrumentalized logic within the structural organization of montage aesthetics.

What we are in fact witnessing already in the mid-1920s but becoming more decisive in the later 1920s is precisely a gradual shift toward the order of the archival and mnemonic functions of the photographic collection as the underlying episteme of a radically different aesthetics of photomontage. In terms of its conception of the photographic, it is a shift that originates in the same confidence in photography's versatility and reliability that would also drive Warburg's archival project and his confidence not only in the photograph's authenticity as empirical document but in the radical emancipatory power of the egalitarian effects of photographic reproduction.

The photographic image in general was now defined as dynamic, contextual, and contingent, and the serial structuring of visual information implicit within it emphasized open form and a potential infinity, not only of photographic subjects eligible in a new social collective but, equally, of contingent, photographically recordable details and facets that would constitute each individual subject within perpetually altered activities, social relations, and object relationships. Once again

ИСТОРИЯ
ВКП (б)
В ПЛКАТАХ
9

1905-ОКТАБРЬ
СОВЕТЫ РАБОЧИХ ДЕПУТАТОВ



ОКТОБРСКИЙ МИТИНГ



Н. З. БАУМАН



ПОХОРОНЫ Н. З. БАУМАНА 20 октября 1905 года



Л. Д. ТРОЦКИЙ



ПЕТЕРБУРГСКИЙ СОВЕТ РАБ. ДЕП. НА СУДЕ С ЗАЩИТНИКАМИ



ЧЛЕНЫ ПЕТЕРБУРГСКОГО СОВЕТА РАБОЧИХ ДЕПУТАТОВ ПО ДОРОЖЕ В СЫЛКУ (1906 г.)



ДЕМОНСТРАЦИЯ В ПЕТЕРБУРГЕ 18 ОКТЯБРЯ 1905 ГОДА



ЖЕРТЫ ПОГРОМА

В "дни свободы" (с конца октября до начала декабря) легально существуют советы рабочих депутатов, организуются профсоюзы, легальные социальные демократические клубы, легально издаются революционные газеты (органы большевиков "Новая жизнь", "Борьба", "Вперед" и др.). Пролетариат готовится к вооруженному восстанию.

it would be worthwhile to investigate the parallels between the Soviet model of the photographic and the radical reconception of the historic process emerging simultaneously in the work of the French *Annales* historians Marc Bloch and Lucien Febvre. These parallels between the conception of the historical process and the construction and ordering of the photographic representation become most obvious, for example, when we read Ossip Brik's following argument:

[T]o differentiate individual objects so as to make a pictorial record of them is not only a technical but also an ideological phenomenon. In the pre-revolutionary (feudal and bourgeois) period, both painting and literature set themselves the aim of differentiating individual people and events from their general context and concentrating attention on them. . . . To the contemporary consciousness, an individual person can be understood and assessed only in connection with all the other people—with those who used to be regarded by the pre-revolutionary consciousness as background.¹²

Such an argument implies a radical redefinition of the photographic object itself. It is no longer conceived as a single image-print, carefully crafted by the artist-photographer in the studio, framed and presented as a pictorial substitute. Rather, as was the case already for Rodchenko's definition, it is precisely the cheaply and rapidly produced snapshot that will displace the traditional synthetic portrait. The organizational and distributional form will now become the archive, or as Rodchenko called it, the photo-file—a loosely organized, more or less coherent accumulation of snapshots relating and documenting one particular subject.

Rather than plotting the future models of participatory photographic experience under Socialism, Siegfried Kracauer analyzed the actual deployment of the photographic image in the capitalist media practices of Weimar Germany, specifically those governing the weekly illustrated magazines. Linking an individual's capacity to form memory images to an immediate relationship with material and cognitive objects, Kracauer's extreme media pessimism argues that it is precisely the universal presence of the photographic image that will eventually destroy cognitive and mnemonic processes altogether:

Never before has an age been so informed about itself, if being informed means having an image of objects that resembles them in a photographic sense. . . . In reality, however, the weekly photographic ration does not at all mean to refer to these objects or ur-images. If it were offering itself as an aid to memory, then memory would have to make the selection. But the flood of photos sweeps away the dams of memory. The assault of this mass of images is so powerful, that it

12. See Ossip Brik, "From Painting to Photography," in *Photography in the Modern Era*, ed. Christopher Phillips (New York, 1989), p. 231ff.

threatens to destroy the potentially existing awareness of crucial traits. Artworks suffer this fate through their reproductions. . . . In the illustrated magazines people see the very world that the illustrated magazines prevent them from perceiving. . . . Never before has a period known so little about itself.¹³

This was the moment when the rise of a photographic media culture allowed a first insight into the newly emerging collective conditions of anomie, the moment when it became possible to imagine that mass cultural representation would cause the destruction of mnemonic experience and of historical thought altogether. Therefore, one of the most enigmatic—and with hindsight ever more plausible—arguments made by Benjamin in 1931 suggested that the historical climax of the medium of photography might have to be situated around 1860. This was because at that moment the photograph had barely accomplished its transition from the aura-invested object to the increasingly emptied structure of mere technological reproduction, and at the same time photography—as an emerging emancipatory technology—could still contain the social promise of radically different forms of collective interaction and subjecthood.

The Beginnings of Richter's Atlas

If we now consider how the works of artists of the postwar period, and Richter's *Atlas* in particular, positioned themselves with regard to these photographic legacies of the historical avant-gardes, we can easily recognize that Richter's collection of found amateur photographs combined with journalistic and advertising photography inverts the utopian aspirations of the avant-garde on every level. If some of the Soviet and Weimar practices and theorizations had defined photography in a teleological perspective as a cultural project of enactment and empowerment, of articulation and self-determination, from the very outset Richter contemplates the reigning social uses of photography and their potential artistic functions with an attitude of profound scepticism. If the agitational and emancipatory dimension of photomontage had originated in a desire for the radical transformation of hierarchical class relations and of the structures that determine authorship and production, Richter's *Atlas* seems to consider photography and its various practices as a system of ideological domination, more precisely, as one of the instruments with which collective anomie, amnesia, and repression are socially inscribed.

After his transition from East to West Germany in 1961, Richter started this collection of photographic images whose ultimate purpose—at least initially—seems to have been unclear even to him. Organized according to the rectangular

13. Siegfried Kracauer, "Photography," in *Mass Ornament*, ed. and trans. Thomas Levin (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998), p. 58.

grid's wholly traditional display system, the images appear to have been chosen—at first glance at least—solely for their sentimental value: recording instances and subjects from family history. Only one of the images from the first four panels would later serve as a matrix for one of Richter's photo-paintings, begun at the time when the initial panels for the *Atlas* were assembled (*Christa and Wolfi*, 1964). The others—including the fourth panel, consisting almost entirely of amateur landscape photographs taken during holiday travels—would remain seemingly mute, inconsequential documents. These photographic images appear at first as though they had been torn from a family album shortly before Richter's flight from East Germany to serve as souvenirs of a past that was being left behind forever, or as though they might have been mailed to him from his relatives in the East to console the young artist about his recent departure from his loved ones.

If we assume that the initial impulse to form the *Atlas* in fact originated in Richter's recent experience of the loss of a familial and social context as well as in the encounter with Germany's self-inflicted destruction of its identity as a nation-state, it would be plausible to consider the *Atlas* as one more, and in many ways a very different, example in a long-standing tradition of cultural practices, just as—on the other side of that historical divide—Warburg's *Mnemosyne Atlas* had responded to a similar experience of a particularly acute "memory crisis."¹⁴

But as we indicated earlier, a different type of "memory crisis" had been confronted by artists and theoreticians of photography already in the late 1920s, anterior to the historical destruction of humanist subjectivity but not anterior to the rise of a photographic mass culture and its devastating (or emancipatory) effects on the auratic work of art and the mnemonic image. Mnemonic desire, it appears then, is activated especially in those moments of extreme duress in which the traditional material bonds among subjects, between subjects and objects, and between objects and their representation appear to be on the verge of displacement, if not outright disappearance. This would undoubtedly have been a condition foundational to postwar German culture in particular, entangled as it was in the double bind of the collective disavowal of history through a repression of the recent past and an almost hysterically accelerated and expanded apparatus of photographic production to solicit artificial desire and consumption.

Those two rather different formations within which Richter's *Atlas* can be conceived of as responding to the condition of a "memory crisis" give rise to a difficulty with regard to how to position the work. The first of these perspectives is utterly historical and specific to the social and ideological framework of postwar Germany after Fascism. The second one by contrast, possibly—but not entirely—

14. Richard Terdiman coined the concept of "memory crisis" to analyze those historical circumstances that generate an actualization of mnemonic efforts within the cultural practices of modernity, the efforts both to theorize the conditions of memory and to enact new cultural models of the mnemonic. See Richard Terdiman, *Present Past: Modernity and the Memory Crisis* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993).



unrelated to the first, considers the impact of photographic media-culture on the project of painting and on the experience of the authentic object at large. Clearly, the questions raised by Kracauer concerned first of all the devastating impact of the photograph on the artisanally produced, aura-filled work of art, which contained what he called the “monogram of history.” In Kracauer’s enigmatic definition, this “monogram” constituted the singularity of artistic form, in that it succeeded in bringing the knowledge of death to the deepest resolution within a given representation and thereby resisted repression at its most profound level.

Richter, as a subject of the postwar period, would now have to rephrase this very question, namely, whether it could even be possible to conceive mnemonic images at the moment of the most violent, collectively enacted repression of history, a repression for which photographic media-culture had become now, even more than in Kracauer’s time, the primary agent. Simultaneously, as a painter, Richter would have seen himself faced—as were all other painters of his generation—with the question of whether and how paintings could even continue to be conceived from within a confrontation with the apparatus of photographic mass culture.

Therefore the photographic images of family members that make up the first four panels of the *Atlas* seem to have served Richter—as they had served Kracauer in 1927 and Benjamin in 1931, and again Roland Barthes in 1979 (when the confrontation with the death of his mother made him write a contemporary phenomenology of photography)—as the point from which the reflection on the relationship between photography and historical memory would originate. It was as though photography’s oscillating ambiguity, as a dubious agent simultaneously enacting and destroying mnemonic experience, could at least be fixed for one moment by situating the image in an analogue to the mnemonic imprint of the family relation itself.

After all, this is the imprint where physical contiguity and the referent of psychic inscription could not be questioned, where the causality and materiality of mnemonic experience seemed to be guaranteed. Whether this mnemonic imprint would be defined as that of genetic and hereditary encoding (the foundation of a proto-racist theory as suggested in the ideas about memory developed by Aby Warburg’s teacher, Richard Semon),¹⁵ or whether it would trace the more or less successful psycho-sexual organization according to the Oedipal laws that determine the formation of subjectivity (e.g., Freud’s inherent definition of psychic memory), or whether memory would be conceived of as determined by class and social institution (as proposed in Durkheim’s theorization of memory structure), it is in the reflection upon the family image that the power of mnemonic ties to the past and their inextricable impact on the present could be most credibly verified as material processes, alternatingly—like photography—assuring and assaulting the formation of identity.

15. See Richard Semon, *Die Mneme als erhaltendes Prinzip im Wechsel des organischen Geschehens* (Leipzig, 1904).



The fact that the mobilization of an atlas of remembrance against a massive apparatus of repression did not just result from the private experience of a loss of a geopolitical context and social-familial order, but, as we have argued, to an equal degree from the encounter with the rapidly changing functions and structures of the photographic image that Richter discovered after his arrival in the West, becomes apparent already by the fifth panel of the *Atlas*. In this panel, the homogeneity of the photographic material that had heretofore consisted exclusively of the more or less haphazard collection from the family album is eroded by a peculiar, and at first unfathomable, heterogeneity of picture types.

Introducing a variety of clippings from West German illustrated journals (such as *Der Stern*), Richter seems to have recorded his first encounters with those mass cultural genres that had heretofore been more or less unknown to him. Having escaped from a country where advertising of any kind had been prohibited, where fashion photography (let alone soft- or hardcore pornography) was outlawed, and where images soliciting the desire for tourism would have been banned from the photographic public sphere of the Communist state, Richter could now, for the first time, endlessly peruse these images in abundance. It is not surprising then to see that precisely those categories (fashion, travel, softcore pornography and advertising) would in fact become the first to interrupt the homogeneity of the amateur and family photographs of the *Atlas*'s first four panels.

In an almost exact analogy to the beginning of Kracauer's essay, Richter thereby juxtaposes media-culture's construction of public identity with the family



photograph's construction of private identity. Memory is thus conceived of in Richter's *Atlas* first of all as an archaeology of pictorial and photographic registers, each of which partakes in a different photographic formation, and each of which generates its proper psychic register of responses. While all of them operate separately (and in relative independence of each other) in the perceptual and the mnemonic apparatus of the subject, they all intersect. And it is precisely this that constitutes that complex field of disavowals and displacements, the field of repression and cover images within which memory is constituted in the register of the photographic order. What had made Kracauer's observation in the initial paragraphs of his essay (with their parallel discussions of an image of a glamorous movie star and one of a grandmother) so uncanny was the realization that—with the rise of media culture—the subject would no longer be primarily constituted within the models of continuity formerly provided by ethnicity and family, nation-state and culture, tradition, class and social customs. Not even the bodily site of the mnemonic appeared any longer as a guaranteed referent, encroached upon as it was by the rapidly shifting fashion system. Instead, newly constructed signs and languages, residing and operating outside of all the mnemonic forms of experience that the family figures had represented, would now enter the mnemonic field, binding the desire for identity in different representational registers altogether.

Thus rather abruptly, in Kracauer's first image, the reader/spectator's libidinal investment is reoriented toward a female figure he has never known, one who will never be known other than in the photographic representation. Her body is no

longer the site of the auratic presence of lived experience and lived encounters (like that of Kracauer's grandmother, or Barthes's mother). Rather it is the body made of an industrially produced representation (the female star) and its technical reproduction. As Kracauer would be the first to point out, it is precisely in the cathexis of desire onto a figure whose body is made up of invisible, printed benday dots that libidinal splitting occurs, at the level of the image as at the level of the psychic formation, investing the photographic medium with the condition of fetishism in an almost ontological fashion.

Kracauer thereby anticipated a whole set of painterly concerns that would reemerge in the work of Roy Lichtenstein and Andy Warhol in the early 1960s, shortly before Richter would join them in the pursuit of understanding how the registers of fetishistic desire and of sign exchange-value had gradually displaced presence, corporeality, and mnemonic experience and how these changes would inevitably alter the face of painting as well. Yet neither Kracauer's theoretical investigation nor Richter's artistic project are motivated by a nostalgic claim to reconstruct the fiction of an authentic identity centered in the body or the aura of the artisanal artifact.

This separates their endeavors dramatically from Barthes's, who in *Camera Lucida* attempts in fact to resituate bodily memory within the image of the mother and attempts to imbue it with an experience of phenomenological authenticity. By contrast, it seems that Richter is engaged in a different project altogether. At its most basic level this difference arises from Richter's attempt to explore the various registers of photography as the representational system within which historical repression is physically enacted and transmitted. Indeed, the notorious attraction of postwar German artists to the banality of German consumer culture that governs Richter's extensive perusal of the material of the first four years of the *Atlas* collection (another example would be Polke's iconography) finds its additional explanation here, namely, that it is not just a variation on the themes of Pop Art (which it certainly was as well, inasmuch as Pop Art itself incessantly had posed the question of the possibility of authentic experience under the reign of totalized commodity production). More specifically, what becomes evident in Richter's archive of the imagery of consumption is the underside of this peculiar West German variation on the theme of banality: the collective lack of affect, the psychic armor with which Germans of the postwar period protected themselves against historical insight.

Thus banality as a condition of everyday life appears here in its specifically German modality as the condition of the repression of historical memory, as a sort of psychic anesthesia. Its counterpart—banality as a condition of aesthetic posture—is, of course, proclaimed by Richter as well, explicitly when he notoriously states that "the most banal amateur photograph is more beautiful than the most beautiful painting by Cézanne." Once again, then, two attitudes—the historical and the aesthetic—are fused here in a way that makes it doubly difficult to unpack the real project of the *Atlas*. For in his slightly juvenile assertion of a radical anti-aesthetic

position, Richter publically associates himself with an avant-garde posture that had been recently revitalized in Pop Art's rediscovery of Duchamp. From a position quite typical for postwar German artists, primarily oriented toward the New York and Paris activities of the moment rather than toward the overshadowed legacies of the historical avant-garde of the 1920s, Richter explicitly credits the work of Robert Rauschenberg with having provided his introduction to collage/montage aesthetics, while claiming that he was either totally unaware of the photomontage practices of the Weimar Dadaists or that he was outright hostile to whatever model of political agitation in photomontage he might have seen in the work of John Heartfield during his life in the German Democratic Republic. This paradoxical historical and geopolitical shift poses a number of additional questions in the reading of Richter's photographic archive.

First, it poses the question of how the principle of random accumulation came to operate under substantially different historical circumstances from those of photomontage's inception, i.e., at a moment now when randomness and arbitrary juxtaposition function not only as established aesthetic procedures but also as a kind of socially enforced legitimization of anomie disguised as an advanced state of individual independence. In Rauschenberg's hands the collage aesthetic had re-inaugurated the elimination of authorial choice and artistic authority by intrinsically linking authorship to the actual conditions of experience within advanced consumer culture, where the formation of exchange-value residing in the sign solely determines the constitution of the identity of the consuming subject. This is to say that in the postwar moment techniques of decentering the subject and dismantling authorial claims had changed in the transmission from Duchamp to John Cage, one of the formative figures for Rauschenberg's collage culture.¹⁶ It is not easy to determine whether, in what was now the period of the neo-avant-garde, the radically subversive decentering of the (bourgeois) subject had just become a principle of affirmative indifference toward subjectivity altogether (e.g., Cage's Zen approach) or whether, in the postwar recurrence of these strategies, the politically enforced elimination of subjectivity necessitated this aesthetic recourse to structural, perceptual, and cognitive anomie, since this model alone seemed to enact the decreasing validity of concepts of communicative action, self-determination, and transparent social organization.

But second, and most important perhaps from the perspective of this essay, such an attitude provokes the question of how and whether this insistence on anomic banality (even if given only as a posture) and the aesthetic project of dismantling the armor of psychic repression could ever be reconciled.

16. The consistent decay of the dialectical potential of the procedures of fragmentation, aleatory order, and arbitrary relations already evident in the first instances of their postwar rediscovery in the work of Rauschenberg and Paolozzi leads ultimately to their deployment as mere strategies of domination in contemporary advertising. It seems, however, that as early as the late 1940s artists such as Nigel Henderson recognized the problematic conditions of a mere reiteration of the photomontage aesthetic by formulating an archival counter-aesthetic, as is evident in his extraordinary photographic panel *Screen* (1949–52).



This question will be partially answered by Richter himself, since already in the eleventh panel of the *Atlas*, presumably dating from around 1964–65, a first set of images suddenly emerges from within the overall banality of the found photographs, rupturing the entire field. This puncturing suddenly positions the *Atlas* project within the dialectics of amnesia and memory that we have attempted to explore in this essay. Functioning in the manner of a punctum within the heretofore continuous field of banal images and their peculiar variation on the condition of the studium,¹⁷ the first set of photographs of victims from a concentration camp

17. The terms “studium” and “punctum” are, of course, those coined by Roland Barthes in his *Camera Lucida* to distinguish two modes of reading a photograph: the first one allowing for an apprehension of the obvious information provided by the image, the second one defining a peculiar point of contact between spectator and photograph, highly subjective and unpredictable, in which the perception



now functions as a sudden revelation, namely, that there is still one link that binds an image to its referent within the apparently empty barrage of photographic imagery and the universal production of sign exchange-value: the trauma from which the compulsion to repress had originated. Paradoxically, it is at this very moment that the *Atlas* also yields its own secret as an image reservoir: a perpetual pendulum between the death of reality in the photograph and the reality of death in the mnemonic image.

of the spectator is "pricked" or wounded, since the photograph suddenly opens up access to what we have called throughout this essay the mnemonic experience. See *Camera Lucida*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981).



*Opposite and above: Richter.
Panels 17 and 18 of Atlas.*