

Narvika Bovcon
Faculty of Computer and Information Science, University of Ljubljana
Ljubljana, Slovenia
narvika.bovcon@fri.uni-lj.si

Aleš Vaupotič
Research Centre for Humanities, University of Nova Gorica
Nova Gorica, Slovenia
ales.vaupotic@ung.si

A NETWORK OF THEMES: A QUALITATIVE APPROACH TO GERHARD RICHTER'S *TEXT*

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Abstract

Gerhard Richter's books *Text* – a collection of painter's verbal statements about his artistic method – and *Atlas* – 783 sheets with images, mainly photographs and visual notations – are two archives that complement the understanding of his diverse artistic practice. The paper presents a textual model that experimentally simulates a possible ordering principle for archives. Richter's statements in the book *Text* are cut up and used as short quotations. Those that relate to multiple aspects of the painter's oeuvre are identified as hubs in the semantic network. The hubs are organized paratactically, as an array of different themes. The paper presents a methodological hypothesis and an experimental model that aim to connect the research of real networks with the paradigms of humanistic interpretation. We have to bear in mind that the network is a result of the researcher's interpretative approach, which is added to the initial archive included in the book *Text*. The breaking up of Richter's poetics into atoms of quotations is an experimental proposal of a new textuality in art history and humanities, which

has its own history. In comparison to digital archives with complex interfaces that often tend to obscure the content, the elements in our experiment appear as specific configurations of the semantic network and are presented in a limited number of linear texts. The method of listing of quotations gathers the fragments into a potential “whole”, i.e. a narrativized gateway to an archive according to the researcher's interpretation.

Key Words: artistic archive, narrativization, networks, author's poetics, Gerhard Richter

The paper scrutinizes two connected archives, an archive of images and an archive of texts written by the author of the images about his own work. Ordering of an image archive always resorts to verbal notations, explanations and, often, also tagging of images. On the other hand, an archive of texts involves understanding of descriptions, which typically function as an inner visualization or imagining of the described pictures, practices and concepts. The relation between the two archives – at first glance straightforward, as one would expect the textual archive to be an explanation of the archive of images – is nevertheless a complicated one, because neither of the archives is a simple, unambiguous narrative. Quite the opposite, every archive is essentially a collection of separate pieces of meaning that together form larger narrative structures, depending on how the archive is ordered. Any transformation of an archive into a narrative begins with the ordering of an archive. Relations among the elements of the archive are not stable, they are revealed and temporarily fixed through queries, which function as interpretative interventions. The two archives of Gerhard Richter thus connect to inspire the inquiries that govern the directions of understanding of each element and of constellations of elements.

To order archives of images is a contemporary challenge that finds solutions in projects, such as Google Images on the Internet and in the scholarly context with the digitized collections of art-historic institutions. However, the same issue has been tackled before, with atlases of geographical and astronomical knowledge since the sixteenth century, the atlases containing tabular collections of knowledge of other disciplines since the nineteenth century, and in the beginning of the

twentieth century with the emergence of photographic reproduction of art historical objects, when e.g. Aby Warburg tried to find similar expressions in the human forms throughout the history of art in his project *Mnemosyne-Atlas* (*Der Bilderatlas Mnemosyne*, 1928-29). Approximately at the same time Walter Benjamin compiled a textual archive that offered a scattered, but objective and complex view on the society and culture of the nineteenth and early twentieth century in his famous unpublished *Arcades Project* (*Das Passagen-Werk*, 1927-40).

To understand the paintings of Gerhard Richter is a complex task: he paints “photo-paintings” and “abstracts”, grey monochromes and colour charts, he uses mirrors or glass panels and arranges photographs on the boards of his major conceptual work *Atlas*. The two books that he published complement the understanding of his diverse artistic practice. The book *Text* (2008, English 2009) is a collection of Richter's verbal statements, notes and interviews about his artistic method since 1962 till 2007, while the book *Atlas* (2006) comprises 783 sheets with images, mainly photographs and visual notations, that Richter collected since 1962 and through the years tried to organize in a meaningful way. Combining the archive of images with the archive of verbal statements, the *Atlas* and the *Text*, and relating them to the oeuvre, he builds up a network of meanings that reveals the author's poetics in a quite tangible way.

Richter's official page on the Internet arranges the paintings in different groups according to their technique and motif. However, if we compare these categories with the pages in *Atlas*, i.e. reproductions of panels with ordered photographs – for example *Atlas* sheet number 11 from 1963 that contains newspaper and album photos – we can see that Richter was considering quite diverse motives on the same panel or at the same time, and did not differentiate the pictures according to these categories, especially in the early photo-paintings. Quite the opposite, the pictures of animals, the portraits of family members and pop stars, the chairs, the Holocaust, the planes, they were all part of the complex reality that he was living in, as he explains also in the *Text*.

In contrast to *Atlas* the book *Text* is organized chronologically, however, the same themes reoccur at different points in time, relating to the same examples,

connecting different works and thus shaping the poetics that finally explains the meaning of Richter's art. This paper will present a methodological hypothesis and an experimental model that aim to connect the research of networks with the paradigms of humanistic interpretation. We have cut up Richter's statements in the book *Text* in order to use them as short quotes. Each quote was tagged with a number of keywords that denote the topics to which the quote is related. The topics that relate to multiple aspects of the painter's oeuvre were identified as hubs in the whole of this semantic network (i.e. they appear alongside multiple less frequent tags). In this particular case we have to bear in mind that the network is in fact a result of the researcher's interpretative approach, which is added to the initial archive included in the published book *Text*, edited by Dietmar Elger and Hans Ulrich Obrist.

The process started with a first reading of the whole book, which was the basis for the overall understanding of what the main topics are. This preliminary list of themes was then used for tags. Their connections provide the insight into which the hubs are, of how exactly the topics relate to each other, i.e. of the hierarchy and the organization of the network. This involved an interpretative process based on creative intuition (of a single reader), and thus some ordering of the content. Tagging of each quote with attributes describing the individual topics took place with the second reading. This was a time-consuming process that revealed many ambiguities steaming from the complexities and detailing of meaning in each quote and the (relatively) large scale of the archive. The necessity to tag according to different research questions became obvious. However, this inevitably establishes boundaries to possible uses of the mark-up. The network of links between the tags was experimentally visualized in different ways using IBM visualization tool *Many Eyes* website (which was closed in 2015).

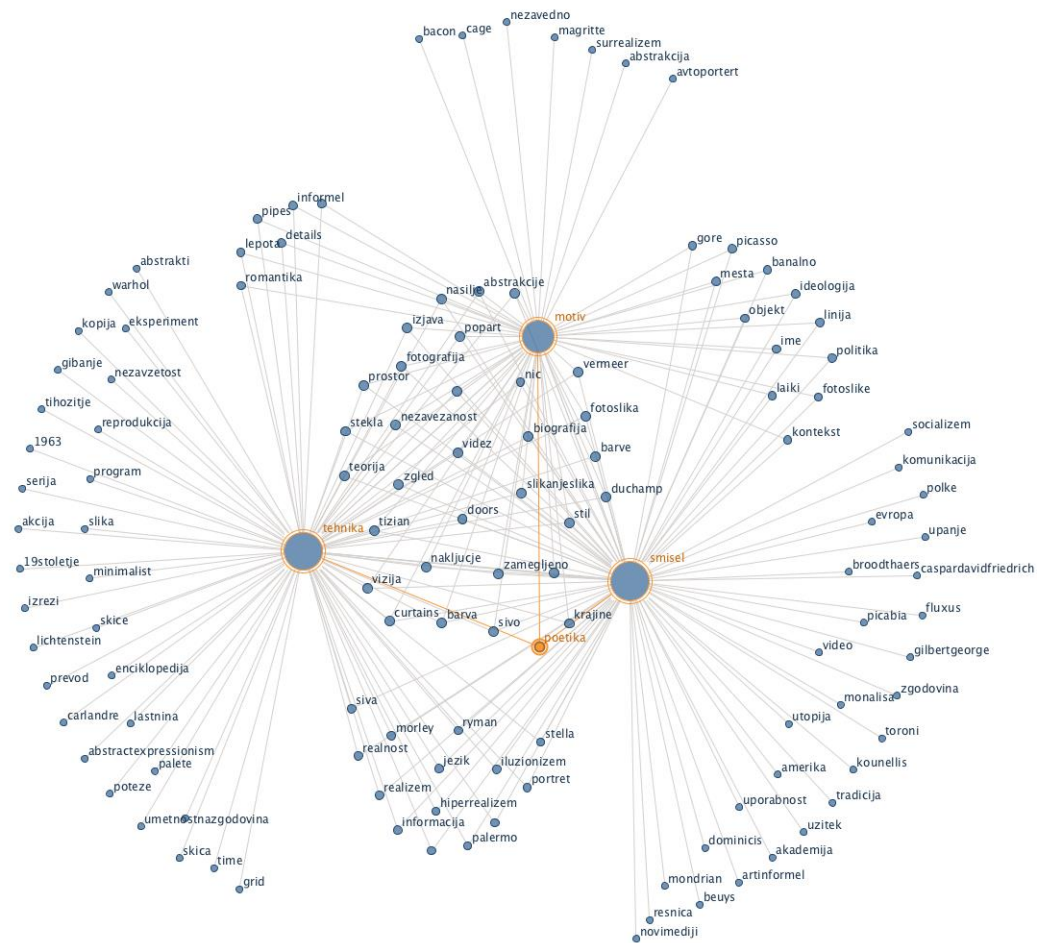


Image 1: An example of connection visualization between tags “technique”, “motif”, “meaning”; e.g. “poetics” is linked to all three themes (majority of the *ad hoc* tags are in Slovene language).

Two research questions about Richter's poetics were considered: the “photo-paintings” as explained through the connection of the “motif” with the “technique” and “meaning”, and the relation of the author to other painters as an alternative art-historical narrative. Here only the results of the first research question will be presented in a form of constellations of quotes that form larger meaningful structures, themes, where each of them is summarized in a sentence.

A similar method is used also on Richter's home page, which offers a selection of quotes arranged under the categories: Art, Subjects (Abstract Paintings, Colour Charts, Grey Paintings, Land-, Town-, Seascapes, “October 18,

1977 /Baader-Meinhof/”, Photo Paintings, Portraits, Other Subjects), Mediums (Painting, Photography, Works on Paper, Other Mediums), Atlas, Techniques, Other Aspects. The choice of the categories, which at first glance are neutral semantic tags that could be attributed to any artist's practice, reveals many shortcomings when we read the actual quotes. First of all, the undefined categories such as Other Subjects, Other Mediums, Other Aspects, are just that, undefined and therefore meaningless in relation to other categories. E.g. the quotes in Other Aspects could more productively be gathered under the category about Richter's poetics, since in those quotes he talks about the role of nature and chance in his making of art. On the other hand, the category Art, which could also be rephrased as Poetics, gathers quotes about the biography of Richter, about a singular episode of the Capitalist Realism, and about the truth, religion and art, which is given too much emphasis and is quite partial, since Richter talks in connection to his process of making of art also about nothingness, the picturing of reality and the refusal of ideologies. Thus the categorization, the selection of quotes and the overall interpretation miss the point when they replace the linear narrative of the printed *Text* with the digitization of the database and an interface that both do not focus enough on the meaning of Richter's work. Another example of the problematic categories is the section Mediums, where Painting is on the same level as Photography, although Richter never makes photos but only uses photography to make paintings. Finally, the categories under Subjects could be connected, as it will be shown in our reordering of themes bellow, by the relation of the motif and the technique (e.g. abstract paintings are defined simultaneously with technique and motif, therefore these two categories cannot be separated, on the other hand, when we take a closer look at the category Technique, we realize that it only gathers quotes about the blurring process used in photo-paintings and not about other techniques to create abstract or grey paintings or colour charts etc.).

In contrast to our project, the categories on the web page do not interconnect the quotes to create larger meaningful wholes as Richter in his narration in fact does. On the contrary, the quotes under the categories become even more fragmented and unordered, they function as separate meaningful objects and tend to obscure the understanding of Richter's work.

In Richter's painting the motif is inextricably tied with its realization in the painterly technique, which for photo-paintings is the process of blurring, whereas the painting itself is based on the photograph, and all this is used to create the appearances of our reality, which is Richter's poetics. In the last segment, a series of themes – i.e. Richter's ideas summarized in a sentence that describes one aspect of the research question – will be presented. The method of listing of quotes gathers the fragments into a potential “whole”, i.e. a narrativized gateway to an archive according to the researcher's interpretation.

Theme 1: *The reality of a painting, the unreality of a photograph, and when a photograph becomes an object.* A painting is real as it is always artfully painted, whereas a photograph is unreal and non-existent, because it merely represents “the other reality”¹. The photographs are objective by referring to an object or by documenting it, but themselves they are not objects – they become objects when Richter construes them as such and documents or paints them as photographic paintings². He uses painting as a way to realize photographs³.

Theme 2: *The rebellion and the liberation: what is banal.* In the sixties black and white photographs were showing the people, what reality looks like (in newspapers, in family albums, also the television was in black and white)⁴. The

1 A painted picture, even if it is entirely illusionistic, will always contain some reality, since it is made by hand and is a picture traditionally defined as a painting (=the art of painting). In contrast, a photograph loses its own reality the more precisely it portrays the other reality and, if you look at it like that, the photograph's only "reality" is its own unreality – i.e., its non-existence is its actual quality. (114)

2 First of all, only photographs can be objective, because they relate to an object without themselves being objects. However, I can also see them as objects and even make them into objects – by painting them, for instance. From that point onwards they cannot be, and are not meant to be, objective any more – nor are they meant to document anything whatever, whether reality or a view of reality. They are the reality, the view, the object. They can only be documented. (60)

3 Suddenly, I saw it (=the photograph) in a new way, as a picture that offered me a new view, free of all the conventional criteria I had always associated with art. It had no style, no composition, no judgement. It freed me from personal experience. For the first time, there was nothing to it: it was pure picture. That's why I wanted to have it, to show it – not use it as a means to painting but use painting as a means to photography. (59)

4 Basically it was just more unusual, back then, to create black-and-white oil paintings, and more real, because all the newspapers, the daily diet of photographic material, including television, was black and white, and the photo albums and photography itself – all of it was black and white, which is difficult to imagine these days. That's why it imbued a sense of reality into painting that represented something completely new. Looking at them now, the likeness to photographs, the documentary quality, aren't as evident, because the paintings just seem like paintings. But black-and-white photography has managed to retain a unique quality; the F.A.Z. (=Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung) still uses black-and-white photographs, even if the majority would probably prefer them to be in colour. (442)

photograph was a crutch for the painter to get to reality⁵. The painting of photographs was a rebellion against academic painting⁶ and a liberation as far as the choice of motif is concerned⁷. The banality of themes of photographs is part of Richter's evasive strategy⁸. Years later he denies that he would be indifferent as regards the choice of a motif⁹.

Theme 3: *How a photograph can be used for painting, and how a photographic appearance is achieved with painterly means.* Painting by using photographs allows Richter to “paint against (his) will”¹⁰, i.e. against his personal way of seeing things, his education, it prevents stylistic transformations and “allows (him) to be as universal and non-personal as possible”¹¹. Since the camera doesn't apprehend the objects, but merely sees them, with its aid the painter can circumvent apprehension and merely see and make the picture¹². The photograph is a tool¹³. Richter invented the technique of blurring the surface of the painting, which makes the painting even more like a photograph. It erases the personal style, the liquidized transitions enable the author to refrain from making

5 Photography had to be more relevant to me than art history: it was an image of my – our – present-day reality. And I did not take it as a substitute for reality but as a crutch to help me to get to reality. (64)

6 I had had enough of bloody painting, and painting from a photograph seemed to me the most moronic and unartistic thing that anyone could do. (21)

7 Do you know what was great? Finding out that a stupid, ridiculous thing like copying a postcard could lead to a picture. And then the freedom to paint whatever you felt like. Stags, aircraft, kings, secretaries. Not having to invent anything any more, forgetting everything you meant by painting – colour, composition, space – and all the things you previously knew and thought. Suddenly none of this was a prior necessity for art. (31)

8 Perhaps the choice is a negative one, in that I was trying to avoid everything that touched on well-known issues – or any issues at all, whether painterly, social or aesthetic. I tried to find nothing too explicit, hence all the banal subjects; and then, again, I tried to avoid letting the banal turn into my issue and my trademark. So it's all evasive action, in a way. (54)

9 But the motifs never were picked at random: not when you think of the endless trouble I took to find photographs that I could use. (170)

10 (64)

11 (80)

12 The photograph reproduces objects in a different way from the painted picture, because the camera does not apprehend objects: it sees them. In 'freehand drawing', the object is apprehended in all its parts, dimensions, proportions, geometric forms. These components are noted down as signs and can be read off as a coherent whole. This is an abstraction that distorts reality and leads to stylization of a specific kind. By tracing the outlines with the aid of a projector, you can bypass this elaborate process of apprehension. You no longer apprehend but see and make (without design) what you have not apprehended. And when you don't know what you are making, you don't know, either, what to alter or distort. (32)

13 When I paint from a photograph, this is part of the work process. It is never a defining characteristic of the vision: that is, I am not replacing reality with a reproduction of it, a 'Second-Hand World'. I use photography to make a painting, just as Rembrandt uses drawing or Vermeer the camera obscura. (32)

statements about things – the blurring emphasizes imprecision of the statement about the object, but also precision about the painterly statement itself¹⁴. He blurs the paintings to make objects equally important (and unimportant) – parts connect better, and excess of information is avoided¹⁵. A blurry image shows more by taking advantage of the viewer's imagination¹⁶. Smudging is just a method to speed up the painting process¹⁷.

Theme 4: *The appearances*. Richter paints “to picture to (himself) what is going on”¹⁸, he seeks “our picture, our looks and appearances and views, definitive and total”¹⁹. Painting is like a religious quest for meanings²⁰. Richter says contradictory things regarding the question, whether he uses paintings to

14 This superficial blurring has something to do with the incapacity I have just mentioned. I can make no statement about reality clearer than my own relationship to reality; and this has a great deal to do with imprecision, uncertainty, transience, incompleteness, or whatever. But this doesn't explain the pictures. At best, it explains what led to their being painted. Pictures are something different, you see; for instance, they are never blurred. What we regard as blurring is imprecision, and that means that they are different from the object represented. But, since pictures are not made for purposes of comparison with reality, they cannot be blurred, or imprecise, or different (different from what?) How can, say, paint on canvas be blurred? (60)

15 I blur things to make everything equally important and equally unimportant. I blur things so that they do not look artistic or craftsmanlike but technological, smooth and perfect. I blur things to make all the parts a closer fit. Perhaps I also blur out the excess of unimportant information. (33)

16 I've never found anything to be lacking in a blurry canvas. Quite the contrary: you can see many more things in it than in a sharply focused image. A landscape painted with exactness forces you to see a determined number of clearly differentiated trees, while in a blurry canvas you can perceive as many trees as you want. The painting is more open. (81)

17 (A painting) is simply (/) a photograph painted with oils. And the fact that it looks a bit different from the original isn't due as much to intention as to a lack of ability, to impatience. The hyperrealists did it very nicely and very decisively, because they took so much time over it. And when I painted a picture, it had to be finished within a day, because I didn't really care enough. It just needed to be roughly similar. I didn't need to make an exact copy. That's why I introduced blurring. Smudging was one of my methods. (84)

18 To try out what can be done with painting: how I can paint today, and above all what. Or, to put it differently: the continual attempt to picture to myself what is going on. (96)

19 The motive or rather the premise of my new pictures is the same as that of almost all my other pictures: it is that I can communicate nothing, that there is nothing to communicate, that painting can never be communication, that neither hard work, obstinacy, lunacy nor any trick whatever is going to make the absent message emerge of its own accord from the painting process. I don't paint for the sake of painting. (/) I look for the object and the picture: not for painting or the picture of painting, but for our picture, our looks and appearances and views, definitive and total. How shall I put it: I want to picture to myself what is going on now. Painting can help in this, and different methods = subjects = themes are the different attempts I make in this direction. (93)

20 The first impulse towards painting, or towards art in general, stems from the need to communicate, the effort to fix one's own vision, to deal with appearances (which are alien and must be given names and meanings). Without this, all work would be pointless and unjustified, like Art for Art's Sake. (... /) Picturing things, taking a view, is what makes us human; art is making sense and giving shape to that sense. It is like the religious search for God. We are well aware that making sense and picturing are artificial, like illusion; but we can never give them up. For belief (thinking out and interpreting the present and the future) is our most important characteristic. (14)

communicate²¹ or not to communicate – since he knows “nothing”²². To Richter painting does not come without constant effort and struggle²³ and it is aimed at possibly achieving “enlightenment”²⁴.

Theme 5: *The ideology, the horrible*. This complex conceptual conjunction will be put in context by focusing on Richter's interaction with the art theorist Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, who has written the seminal articles on Richter's works, and his *Atlas* in particular. Buchloh emphasizes Richter's efforts to reconstruct the collective historic memory. The banality of Richter's painting's motifs – drawing on family albums and mass media – stems from the destruction of memory in the postwar Germany. “As a German, I was familiar with the idea of not being worth anything,”²⁵ says Richter which is connected with the recurrent themes of violence (e.g. explicitly the Baader-Meinhof related works and the commission for the Reichstag, of which some studies explicitly deal with the Holocaust). Buchloh's thesis about the repression does not seem valid since the development of the Reichstag project is documented, and exhibited, in the *Atlas* (sheets 647-655).

Richter constantly opposes ideologies throughout the *Text* collection. Ideology kills those that are different²⁶. He rejects all definitions – “ideologies,

21 So no matter what I've ever painted, it's always been an attempt to communicate something, whether consciously or unconsciously – about me or the world around me. It's always the attempt to 'get a picture of something', as the expression so nicely goes. (122)

22 'I have nothing to say and I am saying it.' It does not matter what Cage meant by that, or in what context. Every time I suffer by it, it convinces me that I am doing the right thing, the only natural thing. And the Others, so-called, are either wrong, because they make statements, or just as right as I am, because I have been mistaking their works for statements. In defiance of ideology, pictures everywhere therefore say nothing. They are always only efforts to get at the truth(?). I ought to formulate that more precisely. Even if I realize, to my delight, that I am doing the only natural thing, then – (/) I know nothing, I can do nothing, I understand nothing, I know nothing. Nothing.

23 Of course I constantly despair at my own incapacity, at the impossibility of ever accomplishing anything, of painting a valid, true picture or even of knowing what such a thing ought to look like. But then I always have the hope that, if I persevere, it might one day happen. And this hope is nurtured every time something appears, a scattered, partial, initial hint of something which reminds me of what I long for, or which conveys a hint of it – although often enough I have been fooled by a momentary glimpse that then vanishes, leaving behind only the usual thing. (140)

24 However ineptly – desperately ineptly – I set about it, my will, my endeavour, my effort – what drives me – is the quest for enlightenment (apprehension of 'truth', and of the interconnections; coming closer to a meaning (213).

25 (378)

26 I don't want to be a personality or to have an ideology. I see no sense in doing anything different. I never do see any sense. I think that one always does what is being done anyway (even when making something new), and that one is always making something new. To have an ideology means having laws and guidelines; it means killing those who have different laws and guidelines. What is the good of that? (34-35)

opinions, concepts and names for things” – in favour of boundlessness²⁷. The refusal of ideology is incorporated also in his unwillingness to be associated with one particular style of painting, with one technique, with one theme or one artistic statement – therefore he embarks on all possible approaches to painting. Also, Buchloch's claim that Richter's *Atlas* is an archive disclosing an anomic state of society that lies ambivalently between order and disorder – Buchloch speaks of Richter's “insistence on anomic banality (even if given only as a posture)” (Buchloch 142) – can be countered by Richter's evident attempts to order the archive of images in *Atlas* and also by describing his intention as such in *Text*. The banal is very important, in spite of the fact that Richter first states that he is indifferent to everything. Indifference masks the horrible closeness of death and the uncanny²⁸. The important and the banal meet in his painting of toilet paper²⁹. He mentions Hannah Arendt's concept of “the banality of evil”, and the terrifying banality of unembellished everyday faces³⁰. The chandelier – instead of a royal crown – is an image of horror³¹.

The breaking up of Richter's poetics into atoms of quotations is an

27 I pursue no objectives, no system, no tendency; I have no programme, no style, no direction. I have no time for specialized concerns, working themes, or variations that lead to mastery. (/) I steer clear of definitions. I don't know what I want. I am inconsistent, non-committal, passive; I like the indefinite, the boundless; I like continual uncertainty. Other qualities may be conducive to achievement, publicity, success; but they are all outworn – as outworn as ideologies, opinions, concepts and names for things. (46)

28 That was an attempt at self-protection – saying that I was indifferent, that I didn't care, and so on. I was afraid my pictures might seem too sentimental. But I don't mind admitting now that it was no coincidence that I painted things that mattered to me personally – the tragic types, the murderers and suicides, the failures, and so on. (283)

29 Whether or not it has been fulfilled or how wrong it went is a different question, but the demand was, and remains, to address the things that are most important, that concern us all. And so in relation to the history of art, where nobody had ever painted toilet paper, it was time to paint toilet paper, which is not really banal. (407)

30 I mentioned 'the banality of evil' in order to show that banality has at some point been described as something horrific. It can be a concern to describe the banal as something terrifying. The chandelier (Flemish Crown) is a monster. I don't need to paint a monster; it is enough to paint this thing, this shitty, small, banal chandelier. That thing is terrifying. I've already said some time ago that in order to dissociate myself from Francis Bacon, I didn't have to distort faces. It is much scarier to paint people's faces as banal as I find them in photographs. (407)

31 It is an image of this horror; a detail of it. (... /) Of the misery of this world (...). Perhaps this special culture. (... /) A petit bourgeois culture. But I refuse to discuss it in those terms because now it turns into social criticism where I attack a certain class, the petit bourgeois, those who had this thing in the middle of their living room, the Flemish Crown. That was part of our culture, and I don't want to attack that even though I myself might have suffered under it. And although it was terrible, it was never meant to be an accusation. Now those people are all gone. There was nothing but crime and misery in those living rooms. There is only crime and misery in general (408)

experimental proposal of a new textuality in art history and humanities. The network of quotations obtained from Gerhard Richter's poetological statements in his book *Text* reveals areas of condensation on the surface of utterances. The interpretative intervention passes through analytic segmentation of the archive and the tagging of elements. The semantic tags and their interconnections (coexistence in single quotes) are then used to map the world of Gerhard Richter's art. Around the themes that are presented above, the field of meaning becomes dense, as if it were forming islands in the wider field of possible meanings, which are the world of our lives.

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