
Flatness Regine Prange

Gerhard Richter's monumental piece *Iblan* (fig. 21) forms part of a group of four Jacquard-woven tapestries, whose full effect could be measured when they were exhibited together in a room at Gagosian Gallery in London in 2013 (Ratibor 2013). Each tapestry is based on a digital scan of a quarter of Richter's oil painting *Abstraktes Bild* (1990, private collection, cat. rais. no. 724-4), which in itself is part of a group of four works. By means of this striking change of medium, from abstract painting to woven textile through a digital arithmetic operation, Richter delivered his take on a classic *sujet*, namely, the metaphorical comparison of modern painting, which refutes the illusion of three-dimensionality, with flat textile art. The presentation of *Iblan* in the exhibition *Kunst & Textil* established this historical connection (Brüderlin 2013a). It has its origins in paintings of living rooms by Henri Matisse, Pierre Bonnard, and Édouard Vuillard. In their works, carpets, as well as wallpapers and textile patterns, seem to be identical with the surface of the painting—contrary to their actual figural meaning. In light of the impressionists' dissolution of the picture surface into single color stains, the patterned surfaces of the depicted space and its inhabitants' clothing gain an ambivalent sense, since they refer both to the represented room and, immanently, to painting as an art of colored planes.

When the critique of perspective, and therefore the negation of textile as illusionistic image carrier, became modern art's most important aim, the carpet grew to be its paradigm (Masheck 2013). Franz Marc (1978 [1910], 126) compared the beauty of an Oriental carpet with the work of Wassily Kandinsky, since it tied the means of design to a purely ornamental effect independent from figural representation. Eventually, the art critic Clement Greenberg (1989 [1948], 156–57) declared flatness to be the essence of painting.

The current, postcolonial idea according to which the «birth of abstraction [occurred] out of the spirit of the textile» (Brüderlin 2013b, 34) reaches far beyond the comparison of painting with woven fabric. All paintings following the principle of flatness—from Piet Mondrian to Barnett Newman, Frank Stella, and Richter—appear to be related to carpet patterns, in this view (Adam 2013). The proof of formal similarities, often made plausible by the art-historical method of comparative viewing—using the leveling force of photographic reproduction—is supposed to upraise Western painting, with its leaning towards literal flatness, to a new «world art» (Prange 2014). This is an «imperial» gesture similar to the one of abstraction as a language of the free world during the Cold War (Guiltbaut 1984)—except that now the figure of opposition of the Western world against the East has been transformed into the ideal of a global community (globalism). Additionally,

the early modern idea of the «new ornament» is called for once again, which has its historical foundation in Gottfried Semper's romantic concept of the «carpet wall» as an original form of art and sheltering cover—a concept that was strengthened by Alois Riegl in the sense of an aesthetic generalization of the idea of flatness, even beyond textile (Gaugele 2015; Prange 2015). However, the current exaggeration of the textile as a global art symbol, and its equation with the abstract flat art of Western avant-garde painting, even questions Riegl's relativization of the carpet paradigm in favor of a renewed essentialism of textile as the original art form.

A side-glance at the best-known anti-modern art-historical position reveals that within the current boom of the textile, this reasoning is simply turned into a positive affirmation of it. In his pamphlet *Verlust der Mitte* («Loss of the Center»), Hans Sedlmayr (1948, 85) invokes the flatness of «autonomous» painting as a core argument of his damning indictment of modern art. The flat picture does not relate to the three-dimensional objects of the interior and therefore dissolves the principle of artistic unity. According to Sedlmayr, modern painting cannot be compared to the ornament, which has meaningful depth, but rather to the meaningless pattern, which can be created through mechanical production or by chance.

However, objections against the decorative flatness of the picture plane are also shared by apologists of modern art. Even Greenberg (1993 [1960], 87), who defined flatness as «unique and exclusive to pictorial art,» was keen to avoid «meaningless» flatness. «Out of this re-created literalness,» he argued, «the Cubist subject re-emerged» (Greenberg 1989 [1959], 77)—among others, we might add, in Pablo Picasso's partially illusionistic collage *Still Life with Chair Caning* (1912, Paris, Musée Picasso), which employs a «real» piece of oilcloth representing a textile fabric.

If the autonomy of painting is abandoned in favor of a «world art,» there is no longer any need to grapple with the destructive process of mere literalness. The crisis of representation seems to be mitigated by the programmatic dissolution of the aesthetic framework, to which both Sedlmayr and Greenberg still adhere. With this in mind, Francesco Bonami (2013, 11) finds a mystic experience of timelessness evoked in Richter's tapestry series: «In the future these tapestries may be seen not as art but as spiritual vessels with symbolic meaning, like that carried by Native American weavings. . . . They might even eventually become carpet prayers, less images than objects of cult.»

This comment completely foregoes the works' dissonant structure and their consequent continuation of Richter's artistic strategies, which take aim in a critical manner at the modernist ideology of flatness since the early 1960s, culminating in Informel. Richter's and his modernist predecessors' iconoclasm is not a religious one, but an immanently artistic one (Prange 2006). Already in his photorealistic works, Richter turned the mechanics of an informal texture against the representational claim of the technical picture (Wilmes 2008). A dialectical law of motion is also furthered by the technique of the squeegee that characterizes his more recent abstract oil paintings. This dynamic process can be understood as a radicalized impulse to



Fig. 21 Gerhard Richter, *Iblan*, 2009, warp: Trevira CS, weft: cotton, wool, silk, and acrylic, 276 × 378 cm, edition of 8, ed. no. 143.

enforce modernist flatness over its conservative-expressionist and primitivist interpretation as a conceptual, self-critical quality of the artistic form. Greenberg (1989 [1948], 157) misses this intellectual nature of the «antiaesthetic» picture; his essentialist notion of media self-reflexivity cannot serve as an understanding of the dialectical nature of flatness as a negation of spatial illusion. His claim is wrong: flatness is not the essence of painting but its material condition. It is rather the negation of this materiality of the picture plane that constitutes painting as an aesthetic method since Giotto and his followers. Greenberg follows this classicist principle in terms of a romanticist ideal of the «essential» literal picture plane to be represented by painterly work. Consequently, he does not recognize the new «ambition» of modern painting—already present in impressionist pointillism and symbolism’s rhythm of lines—to constitute itself through its own means, the line as well as the colored plane, and thus to criticize its authoritarian structures, which are rooted in the metaphysical primacy of *disegno*. This concept of an iconoclast criticism leads to an appropriate interpretation of radical abstraction and an understanding of Richter’s re-staging of *Abstraktes Bild* in his tapestry series.

By his use of textile material, Richter does in no way support the current postcolonial idea of delimitation, nor does he affirm Greenberg’s notion of flatness. As overwhelming as the large-scale formats are, and as «magic» as the ornaments might seem, Richter’s work cannot be understood merely from sensual experience. Particularly confusing is the indecisiveness and incompatibility between the medium of painting and the textile, especially due to the triple enlargement of the original abstract picture that underlines the domination of the brute and complex paint application, which cannot be reconciled with the delicate structure of weaving and thus stands in scandalous opposition to the ornamental macro-structure. The attempt to theoretically confront these discords reveals Richter’s change of medium, which becomes readable as a potentiated negation of form, or a renewed radicalization of flatness, without thwarting the illustrative effect of textile works. Through the enlargement of the original picture, Richter monumentalizes the movement of the squeegee, which «erases» the former composition of colored planes in horizontal courses. The paradoxical spatial effects, created through an extremely indifferent technique that refutes any expressive impulse and figuration, using chance in a different way from Jackson Pollock’s drip paintings, reduces the aesthetic credo of flatness to absurdity. Digital reflection and the transformation of painting into textile weaving are other strategies of flattening, mainly because they evoke the effect of space and gestalt. It is only by taking the carpet paradigm literally and thereby creating a grotesque dissension that Richter counters the previously mentioned mythology of origin. *Iblan* does not accomplish an organic condensation of colored form and textile ornament—as was painterly evoked by Matisse in keeping with his idea of art as a medium of self-indulgent idleness, which again is criticized by Richter (see Söntgen 2008, 40).

For *Iblan*, Richter isolated and enlarged the lower left quarter of *Abstraktes Bild* and mirrored this section horizontally and vertically, thus creating symmetrical ornamental structures alongside the axes.

It becomes clear that Richter—by means of digital technology—here continues his glass-and-mirror works, which culminated in the crystalline glass sculpture presented in Dresden in 2013 (Elger 2013). Their meta-pictorial intent is to reject any depiction or representation; in other words, a transformation of the «absolute» image into a clone. Thus, both mirrors and (glass) windows, formerly proofs of illusionist transparency, bear witness to the principle of infinite repetition and reproduction—a principle that revises the illusion of depth through its potentiation and coagulates in the serial law of flatness. The same is true for the ornamental report as meta-picture. *Iblan* does not represent the textile origin of art—from which Semper once tried to derive a reformation of the arts—but rather presents the work's hybridity, which cannot hide the brutality of the operation and the global character of digital technology, which renders all things compatible with each other and therefore permits the transformation of a handmade picture into the texture of a tapestry.

The flat materiality of the carpet, based on the weaving pattern, with which the early avant-garde connected its ambition of an artistic equalization of figure and ground, is present in *Iblan*, while simultaneously adopting a contrary, critical position. The layers of color from *Abstraktes Bild* now transform into a single layer of weaving. The amorphous color planes are reproduced by adequate colors, and the thickness of the color is transformed into the different thicknesses of the threads (cotton, wool, silk, acrylic). The tapestry presents itself as a flat relief. When seen up close, the structure of the textile is visible, leading to a confusing perception of the canvas structure, which normally remains invisible as the ground of the painting and now becomes visible in its reproduction as a tapestry—it is now a homogeneous texture that unites form and image carrier. The digital flattening of all differences and the repetition, in the form of a reflection, also manifest the ornamental gestalt that was decisively denied by *Abstraktes Bild*. But this gestalt cannot hold its ground, since the mechanical production process leading to it is still too present, as is the destroyed painterly form. With his cunningly hybrid works, Richter sarcastically dismisses any attempt to understand the specifics of painting via textile structures. *Iblan*, a visual essay on the carpet paradigm, opposes the primitivist interpretation of flatness and—particularly through the leveling power of demonstratively staged digital technology—reveals the force of the non-identical.