

Hubertus Butin Gerhard Richter's "Umgeschlagenes Blatt" and the Joys of Illusion

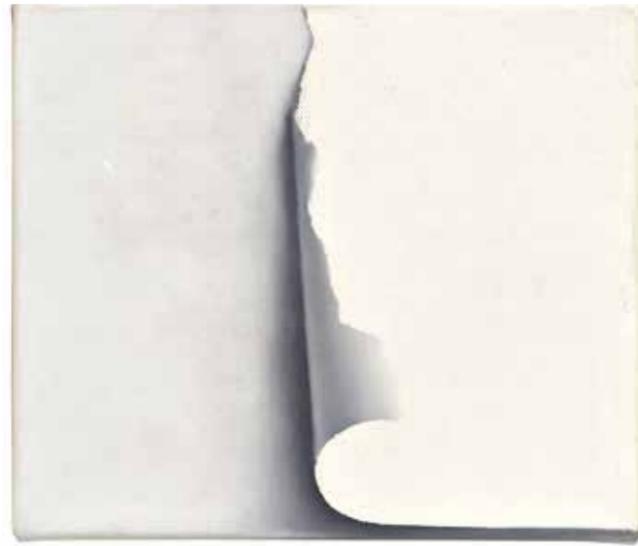
Pictures become "better and better the more beautifully, cleverly, insanely and extremely, the more vividly and incomprehensibly they depict [...] incomprehensible reality in parable form." (Gerhard Richter, in: *documenta 7*, Exhibition Catalogue, Museum Fridericianum et al., Kassel 1982, Vol. 1, p. 85). Of all Richter's pictorial genres, it is probably his seductively illusionistic still lifes from 1965 and 1966 which most closely conform to the epistemological view of art he expresses here. During those years, the artist produced fifteen small-format oil paintings on canvas under the title "Umgeschlagenes Blatt," fourteen of which have the same motif (shown on the right): a perfect trompe l'oeil of a sheet of paper with one corner curving upward, as if on a sketchpad.

This fifteenth example in the series, rendered in light gray and white (figured left), stands out from the rest: Unlike the other paintings, it is laid out in landscape rather than portrait format, and features a sheet that has been torn vertically down the middle. The resulting uneven edge of the sheet curves to the right, casting a shadow on the underlying surface and thus seeming to project into the viewer's space.

This confusing game with levels of reality erases the distance between the depiction and the thing depicted. For besides the trompe l'oeil effect of the sheet motif, the viewer perceives that the three unbent edges on the right, top, and bottom of the paper correspond to the edges of the painting. This makes it seem as if the depicted sheet and the canvas surface were one and

the same, thereby enhancing the pretense of three-dimensionality.

With this "Umgeschlagenes Blatt," Gerhard Richter takes up an artistic tradition that harks back to Greek antiquity. The Antikensammlung collection of classical antiquities held in Berlin's Staatlichen Museen holds a fine example (shown on the far right): A fragment of floor mosaic from the royal palace of Pergamon dating from the first half of the second century B.C. The artist Hephaisstion as the mosaic's creator seemingly has noted his name on a parchment affixed to the tiles with red sealing wax. The parchment's lower right corner has come loose



Lot 11



Gerhard Richter. Umgeschlagenes Blatt. 1965. Oil/canvas. Museum Kurhaus Kleve



Hephaistion's signature. Mosaic fragment from Pergamon. 1st half of 2nd century B.C. Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Antikensammlung

and rolled upwards, casting a small shadow. In reality, however, the sheet is merely part of a mosaic image made from small colored tiles – an extremely refined trompe-l'oeil, in other words.

Oil paintings with curving sheet corners as a motif were very popular among collectors, especially in the 17th and 18th centuries, and were circulated widely. In the mid-18th century, for example, the Frenchman Gaspard Gresly was known for his painted depictions of black-and-white prints hanging from rough wooden walls, sometimes half-torn (shown below). In this way, the competition among the arts is referenced, in which painting enjoys pride of place, given its ability to imitate the others by dint of illusion. As in Hephaisstion's work, Gresly's depiction of the three-dimensional sheet creates a deceptive impression of actual presence.

Gerhard Richter's specific interest in trompe-l'oeil derives from his skeptical stance, in epistemological terms, towards what he calls the "fundamentally incomprehensible world" (*ibid.*, p. 85). Thus, the artist takes the view that only the mere "appearance of reality" can ever be represented, which amounts to reducing the capacity to visualize into a sort of modeling process of relativization (Gerhard Richter, quoted in: Robert Storr: *Conversation with Gerhard Richter*, in: "Gerhard Richter: Forty Years of Painting" Exhibition Catalogue, The Museum of Modern Art, New York et al., Ostfildern-Ruit 2002, p. 297 et seq.). And when it comes to making us almost palpably aware of how limited and imperfect our perception and cognition really are, optical illusions are particularly suited – as illusionary techniques, they are designed from the outset to deceive and confound the viewer. So it is with a sly sense of fun that Richter plays with illusion and the trompe l'oeil technique and explores both for their present-day pictorial possibilities.



Gaspard Gresly. Trompe-l'oeil à la gravure de l'usurière. 1747. Oil/canvas. Private collection

11 Gerhard Richter

Dresden 1932 – lives in Cologne

“Umgeschlagenes Blatt”. 1966

Oil on canvas. 18 × 21 cm (7 1/8 × 8 1/4 in.). Signed and dated twice on the reverse in black felt-tip pen with the work number: zu Nr. 70 Richter 28.12.66. Marked on the stretcher with a stamp in black: KASACK FRANKFURT A.M.

Catalogue raisonné: Elger zu 70. [3568] Framed.

Provenance

Hermann Kasack, Frankfurt a. M. / Artax, Dusseldorf / Private Collection, Rhineland

EUR 600,000–800,000

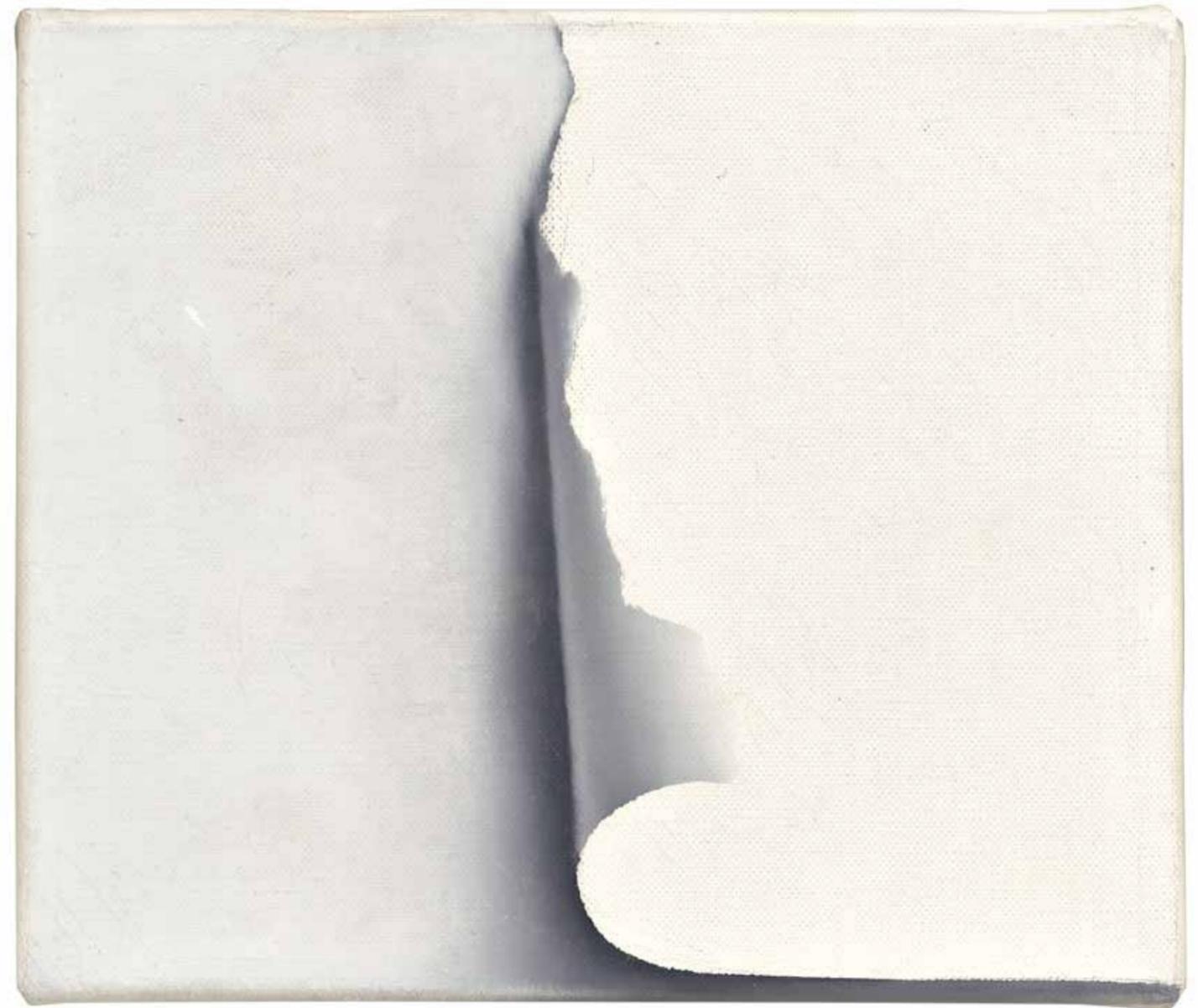
USD 714,000–952,000

Exhibition

Portrait einer Sammlung, z.B. Kasack. Frankfurt a. M., Frankfurter Kunstverein, 1978

- The only landscape format in the 15-work series “Umgeschlagenes Blatt.”
- A fascinating game with levels of reality.
- A centuries-old-pictorial tradition is re-interpreted.

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Original size