

The idiom in photography as the truth in painting.

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The South Atlantic Quarterly

Duke University Press

Volume 101, Number 3, Summer 2002

pp. 541-554

ARTICLE

[View Citation](#)

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The South Atlantic Quarterly 10 1.3 (2002) 541-554

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While contemporary German painter Gerhard Richter is known for the diversity of his oeuvre, his so-called photo-paintings evidence a persistent return to the relationship of two traditionally opposed media. Often startling in their visual effects, these images rely on a highly rhetorical attempt to transcribe what I will label "photographic idiom" into the medium of painting. In some of Richter's works, this photographic reference appears as a high realism, one that we take for granted in the veracious medium of photography, yet cannot help but be impressed to find in painting. Richter's paintings, however, have most to say about photography in their oblique reference to the medium. Richter refers not to the visual plenitude and truth that we usually associate with photography, but rather to its moments of representational inadequacy, to photographic blur and lack of focus that results in deliberately obscured imagery. In these works—of which *Lesende* (1999) (Figure 1) is a good example—the space between photography and painting is at once closed and reopened.

In emphasizing what is idiomatic to photography, I am drawing on the discussion of idiom that [End Page 541] prefaces Jacques Derrida's *The Truth in Painting*.¹ Here, in a series of movements between *idiom*, *painting*, and *truth*, Derrida establishes the special status of idiom in mapping out the specificity of media. Beginning with the statement, "I am interested in the idiom in painting," Derrida poses a range of *translations* of this statement, all of which recast what the idiom may refer to, but none of which describe what it is. This in itself tells us something of Derrida's very specific claims for idiom.

Idiom and truth are for Derrida found to coalesce in a letter written by Cézanne, which includes the statement, "I owe you the truth in painting and I will tell it to you."² Derrida seizes on Cézanne's promise as both a highly idiomatic statement and a powerful model of idiom. This short sentence is able to refer simultaneously, and in a manner that escapes adequate translation, to three relations of truth and painting: first, to Cézanne's knowledge of the truth of the medium; second, to the truth of the world as rendered in painting; and, third, to the truth about painting as told through language. In turning to Cézanne's statement, the *idiom* in painting, with which Derrida began, has now become the *truth* in painting. Here truth is both the problem [End Page 542] of representation more broadly and specifically the problem of representing the medium of painting, or rather representing the medium of painting in writing. Derrida's final configuration of these paired terms, "I am interested in the idiom of truth in painting," completes the equation, joining idiom, truth, and painting, but only insofar as it makes clear the folly of attempting to fasten on the idiomatic, much less to reproduce it. Derrida writes:

One is always tempted by this faith in idiom: it supposedly says only one thing, properly speaking, and says it only in linking form and meaning too strictly to lend itself to translation. But if the idiom were this, were it what it is thought it must be, it would not be that, but it would lose all strength and would not make a language.³

Here Derrida identifies the paradox of idiom. We know what idiom is meant to be, we understand its functioning in language in the broadest sense. Yet when we try to extract an instance of the idiomatic for contemplation we can be sure that what we have in our sights is the appearance of a form far too nuanced to be isolated. When we use idiomatic language, we do so unselfconsciously; to become conscious of our use of idiom is to have the essential feature of that idiomatic usage slip away from us.

Richter's photo-paintings open and turn upon...

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The South Atlantic Quarterly 101:3, Summer 2002.
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