

This self-indulgent, romantic scene is admittedly not fit for public consumption, but perhaps it does pertain to the business at hand. A constructed image, feet in the ground and head in the air, calls forth a symbolic space where pause and reflection take on a particular visual form, a private vocabulary.

What is the relation of this vocabulary to a public vocabulary? Twice in the past two months I have heard art students puzzle over the distance between their public and private voices. It is an issue that preoccupies democratic thought and remains central to the concerns of artists and art educators. Two thinkers, Gerhard Richter, a painter and Richard Rorty, a philosopher, weave these particular lines, sometimes meshing into a coherent web, and other times unraveling into their own preoccupations.

As I attempt to bring some of these issues forward, the theoretical weight will rest primarily upon Rorty's words and secondarily on Richter's images. This should not be misconstrued as a testimony to philosophy as fundamental and art as ornamental. Nothing could be further from my intentions. This has been implemented first because Rorty uses words hence in this format, Rorty is home turf and secondly because text loses less in reproduction than paintings. Along similar lines, the term "language", for the purposes of this paper is meant to include verbal and visual communication.

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## The Indeterminate

The intellectual history of humanity, how our thinking has changed from the paleolithic to the present, is a reflective question. Both philosophy and art provide tools for mapping out changes that occur and for reflecting upon the nature of these changes. Central to this process is the figurative language through which we formulate our thoughts. With this as a foundational position, Richard Rorty seeks to provide a contemporary vocabulary that can service our present needs.

Rorty works a theory that hinges on the contingency of language. Nominalism, a linguistic theory that descends from Wittgenstein and emerges most strongly in the contemporary writings of Donald Davidson, maintains that any language or mode of discourse is self-referential. A consequence of this is that culture, which is constructed through discourse, is inseparable from it. For the nominalist, the problem is not whether a tangible world exists or not, although some radicals would maintain that it doesn't, but rather that the languages that we use exist as distinct and separate parts of that world.

By taking this position, which runs contrary to both realist and romantic perspectives, Rorty seeks to dissolve the metaphor of language as a screen or a lens that sits between the self and reality. He argues that as long as we view language as a screen, we will be forced to jump from one side (reality) to the other (self). The screen or lens metaphor suggests that if we find the *right* screen, the *right* lens, our descriptions will correspond to a preexistent reality or for that

## Rorty and Richter: Private Visions and Public Accounts

By John H. White

*"On the beach  
the other day,  
my toes sunk into  
the gravel-like sand  
while my eyes looked  
over the bay  
toward some  
discrete future."*

matter, a preexistent self. This notion of a true view is rejected by the nominalist. The only views that we have are those passed to us from our culture through our languages. Rorty states:

**"Whereas the metaphor looks irrelevant to the platonist and the positivist, the literal looks irrelevant to the romantic. For the former think the point of language is to represent a hidden reality, the latter think its purpose is to express a hidden reality which lies within us."**

(Rorty, 1989, p.19)

Rorty's task here is to break down the idea of meanings and facts, both of which act to enshrine the notion that language not as a puzzle, which once completed becomes an accurate representation of the world, but as a tool used to work the world. For Rorty, language runs tangentially to both self and reality. He makes claims for a "passing theory, that views language as a flag that we display. Communication is accomplished by how closely our flags correspond to those displayed by others, irrespective of how closely they interpret some objectified reality.

In contrast to the platonic perspective, in nominalism language is not theory designed to adjust to the way that things are, language is causal. It is a new tool thrown out into the world to see how it works. New language, or new metaphors precede theory. From Richter we hear:

**This painting is in the process of obtaining a future, working one out, pointing to it. A future that is not yet anywhere else: it is being celebrated in advance-in the picture.**

(Pehnt, 1989, p. 49)

Unfamiliar flags are thrown into the culture pot. In response, like ants rebuilding a wall, we scurry to reform our perceptions to the new linguistic forms. If they work well, we consider the creator useful, or even a genius, if it works poorly we consider the creator an outsider. New metaphors, paradigms, art etc. work out of the old language but their existence works toward creating a new language system.

In this respect, as these new tools correspond to use rather than to "truth" Rorty is heir to the pragmatic strain that runs through much of American philosophy. To this particular brand of pragmatism, the question is not the reality of a proposition but rather whose purposes does such a proposition serve. For Rorty, truth can only refer to the particulars of language, not to a transcendent universal context.

Many of the same qualities appear in the work of Gerhard Richter. Like Rorty, Richter comes to his discipline with a conservative, analytic eye. This we can see evidenced in his early grey paintings. These paintings emerge from the contingencies of visual tropes. They belong to a nihilist tradition of visual metaphors that seek to make concrete the self-referential art object. Richter states:

**"It was the ultimate possible statement of powerlessness and desperation. Nothing, absolutely nothing left, no figure, no color, nothing. Then you realize that you've painted three of them, that one's better than the others and you ask yourself why that is."**

(Van Bruggen, 1985, p. 88)

These grey paintings, like Rorty's nominalism, spring from the rhetorical structure of the medium. Despite this, Richter's avowed efforts to decontextualize the work never fully materializes. Rather, by his realization that some of the eight works in this series were better than others, he established his "bottom line" for what painting might be. Richter's effort is to use these depleted works as a new set of tools, to rethink preexisting conceptions of how paintings function. Richter again: **"...But apart from that, what strengthens me is the certainty that painting is not a strange hobby: it is a fundamental human activity, and so it has qualities that can be established and identified. If a number of people look at the pictures, and most of them have the same opinion of which is best and which is worst, that for me is confirmation that we all have the ability to recognize quality and understand painting. And that also confirms in me the certainty that despite all of the errors, painting can on principle make manifest our best most human and humane qualities."** (Pehnt, 1989, p. 50)

Although Richter has left the specific structural concerns that the grey paintings engendered for a validating structure lodged in the community, the extension of rules (new tools) of what painting can be remains fundamental to his philosophy. Later he searched for other tropes stating:

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**You certainly can't go on doing it forever. You can't live like that. One must have an opinion. Beautiful as those pictures were, they were concerned with articulated impotence.** (Pehnt, 1989, p. 48)

This movement led him away from his grey series into work that specifically posed questions about the nature of painting. Richter again:

**I saw in my grey pictures, the monotonies. There was no way foreword and I thought, I couldn't care less what happens now. I still believed that the way that I was going was not the general way and very certainly not the right way. It did not fit the criteria of my reasoning at all: I did it virtually against my rationale. It was the opposite of what I believed I ought to be doing or what I had done with the grey pictures. It was imaginative, varied, complicated and colorful. One must see much that happens in art as the artist's reaction to his own development.** (Pehnt, 1989, p. 48)

Thus Richter points the way to Rorty's second contingent relationship, the role of a private vocabulary in a language scheme that is based upon the contingency of use.

Rorty, the philosopher, champions the poet as the voice of society rather than the philosopher. The poet, or *Strong Poet*, from Harold Bloom, achieves, as we all do, self creation through a *final vocabulary*. This vocabulary, however, does not share a deterministic platonic universality with other final vocabularies, nor the *inverted Platonism* of Nietzsche, where we "will" others to our private voice. Rather we build relations whose future is always contingent upon the good will of the community. It is Freud that offers the most appropriate model. Freud, the master poet who in Rorty's terms:

**"...de-universalizes the moral sense, making it as idiosyncratic as the poet's inventions. He thus lets us see the moral consciousness as historically conditioned, a product as much of time and chance as of political and aesthetic consciousness."**  
(Rorty, 1989, p. 30)

Freud's poetics allow us to see that the metaphors we create are the boundaries of our perceptions.

The search, through language, to a particular vocabulary is manifest in that he is known not only for the power of his individual statements, but also for the variety of metaphors that he has thrown into the world. Consequently, Richter works in and out of different styles, reinforcing the notion that his paintings are responses to previous paintings. Richter states:

**I am not pursuing any particular intention, any system or direction. I flee from any attempt to fix myself down, I do not know what I want, I am inconsistent, indifferent, passive. like the indeterminate, the endless, and continuing uncertainty.**  
(Pehnt, 1989, p. 50)

Richter's work from the 60's was influenced by Pop Art's extraction of images and emerges in his hands as a free wheeling and slightly erotic *Helga Matura*, 1966. Subsequently he moves to work from art that is conceptual *Color Chart*, 1966, to work that is chillingly detached-*Eight Student Nurses*, 1966, to work that is political-*48 Portraits* 1971 (nicknamed "capitalist realism), to work that is art historical *Annunciation after Titian*, 1973, to work that is expressionistic *Birds 19xx*, and to work that is a reference to romanticism, *Wiesental*, 1985.

Throughout these works, Richter acts to establish his *final vocabulary*. This happens not through an ideology or rational structure, but rather through reworking of his previously defined metaphors. In this respect, Richter looks toward painting as a discursive structure to play out metaphorical relationships. These relationships refer to the role that painting can assume within the literal world.

Rorty foresees an onslaught of criticism that decries his relativism on one hand and the immorality on his implosion of transcendent morality into prudence on the other. He maintains that a liberal community which does not pose the rational against the "other", does not maintain a rational as a positive paradigm which forces other modes of discourse into the margins of our society, is our best tool for addressing current needs.

Consequently the distinction between beliefs based on rational convictions and those based on reasons other than causes need to be dropped. He questions "Why do you chose your friends?". Any paraphrase of the nature of a particular friend falls short of the actual presence of that friendship. We can polarize and look at the extremes, Socratic dialogue vs. hypnotic suggestion and see a clear split, but most language games, media hype, common discourse, and peer pressure work in the grey area.

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Rorty's contingency speaks to the role of the community as the validate of a public vocabulary. Rorty's irony speaks to the role of the individual as the validator of a private final vocabulary. For Rorty, these two vocabularies do not coincide. Our philosophical problems lie in our attempts to force these two modes of discourse into a single ontological structure. We must give up "the conviction that all the positive values in which man has believed must, in the end, be compatible and perhaps even entail each other" (Rorty, 1989, p. 45)

Richter exemplifies the strong poet, birthing phoenixes out of the ruins of past linguistic systems. But simultaneously, his work moves toward public issues. To see this, let us consider two bodies of work separated by five years.

The first from 1983 is a show that included two seemingly distinct image systems. On one hand, slightly hazy images taken from photographs that speak to a romantic realistic presence; on the other hand, high colored abstractions that play upon the conventions of abstract expressionism. This dualism pits the romantic reality of our historical classical past against the romantic reality of a historical expressive present. Consequently, these works do not appear as a unified vision, but rather force a metaphorical construct that speaks to the indeterminacy of language, the grounding of artistic questions in the conventions of the past, and the act of painting as a mode of discourse dependent upon a community of images. In each, the classical and the expressive, he employs a strategy that specifically negates the traditional reading of the conventions. The expressive forms are constructed, not in a rapid outburst of intuitive force, but rather systematically over an extended period of time. Alternatively, the classical pieces are worked from the common vocabulary of the snapshot, within which Richter deliberately subverts the perfection of the image with smudges that replicate both the process of photography and of painting. Richter subverts both the public (classical-rational) and the private (expressionistic-poetic) with the rhetorical tools of the alternative system.

Again if we consider at the *October 17, 1977* series, we see Richter moving all of these elements into a single body of work. Paintings, taken from snapshots of the Baader-Mienhof Group, conflate the public and private to draw power from these gruesome yet intimate images.

**Richter's recent decision to represent current public history, that is simultaneously to violate the prohibition against representing historical subjects in modern painting and to break the particular taboo against remembering this particular episode of German history — The activities of the Baader-Meinhof Group and the murder of its members in Stammheim Prison — distinguish these paintings from all other work by Richter.**  
(Buchloh, 1989, p. 91)

In these, all of the ambiguities of Rorty's contingent space present themselves and yet the works themselves are highly directed. These are paintings that receive their power through the extension and revision of previous paradigms and yet they become something more. They hover in a memory space that clouds the personal (painting) with the public (photography). They expand rather than coalesce, they provide us with options rather particulars. To quote Rorty:

**A liberal society is one that is content to call true, whatever the upshot of such encounters turn out to be.**  
(Pehnt, 1989, p. 45)

To quote Richter:

**painting is the creation of an analogy for the invisible and unintelligible, which should become figure and should become accessible.....Good paintings are therefore incomprehensible...They are incomprehensible so that they cannot be consumed and remain essential.**  
(Pehnt, 1989, p. 45)

Rorty's public vocabulary does not revolve around natural rights or the inherent morality of mankind but rather on two questions: 1) How to balance peace, wealth and freedom and 2) How to equalize opportunity for self creation. Here the only motivating force would be a desire for a better world for our community. He argues that German guards in concentration camps were not inhuman but rather that the public vocabulary of the community had become insensitive to the pain of others.

A public stance is to be built around a concern for not causing the humiliation of others. Public vocabularies should be measured by this tool. Irony on the other hand is private stance, to be employed by the intellectuals, or the intellect in us. Irony is not a public policy or stance. Irony allows us to maintain our private convictions while realizing that they are always in flux.

Ironist philosophy cannot help public vocabularies. It is up to the disciplines, not philosophy to generate solidarity. Rorty gives literary criticism, poetry and the arts the power to redescribe and reinvent the terms of our public and private discourse. To the issue of the role of solidarity in our public posture, Rorty states:  
**The view that I am offering says that there is such a thing as moral progress, and that this progress is indeed in the direction of greater human solidarity. But that solidarity is not thought of as a recognition of a core self, the**

human essence, in all human beings. Rather, it is thought of as the ability to see more and more traditional differences (of tribe, religion, race, customs and the like) as unimportant as compared with similarities with respect to pain and humiliation -- the ability to think of people as wildly different from ourselves and included as the range of "us". This is why...that detailed descriptions of particular varieties of pain and humiliation rather than philosophical or religious treatises. were the modern intellectual's principle contributions to moral progress. (Rorty, 1989, p. 192)

For Rorty, it is a public service to extend the "us" and to construct a solidarity with others. This extension however, will never elevate the dilemmas that arise over conflicts between this public stance and our private vocabularies. For Rorty the essential moral question is "are you in pain?".

For Richter, whose *October 18, 1977* paintings depict political figures whose ideology he abhors, the same exposure of pain becomes a startling and salient voice. In these works, Richter has stepped beyond the indeterminate and into the arena where the particular vocabulary of the poet has met with the public stance of the state.