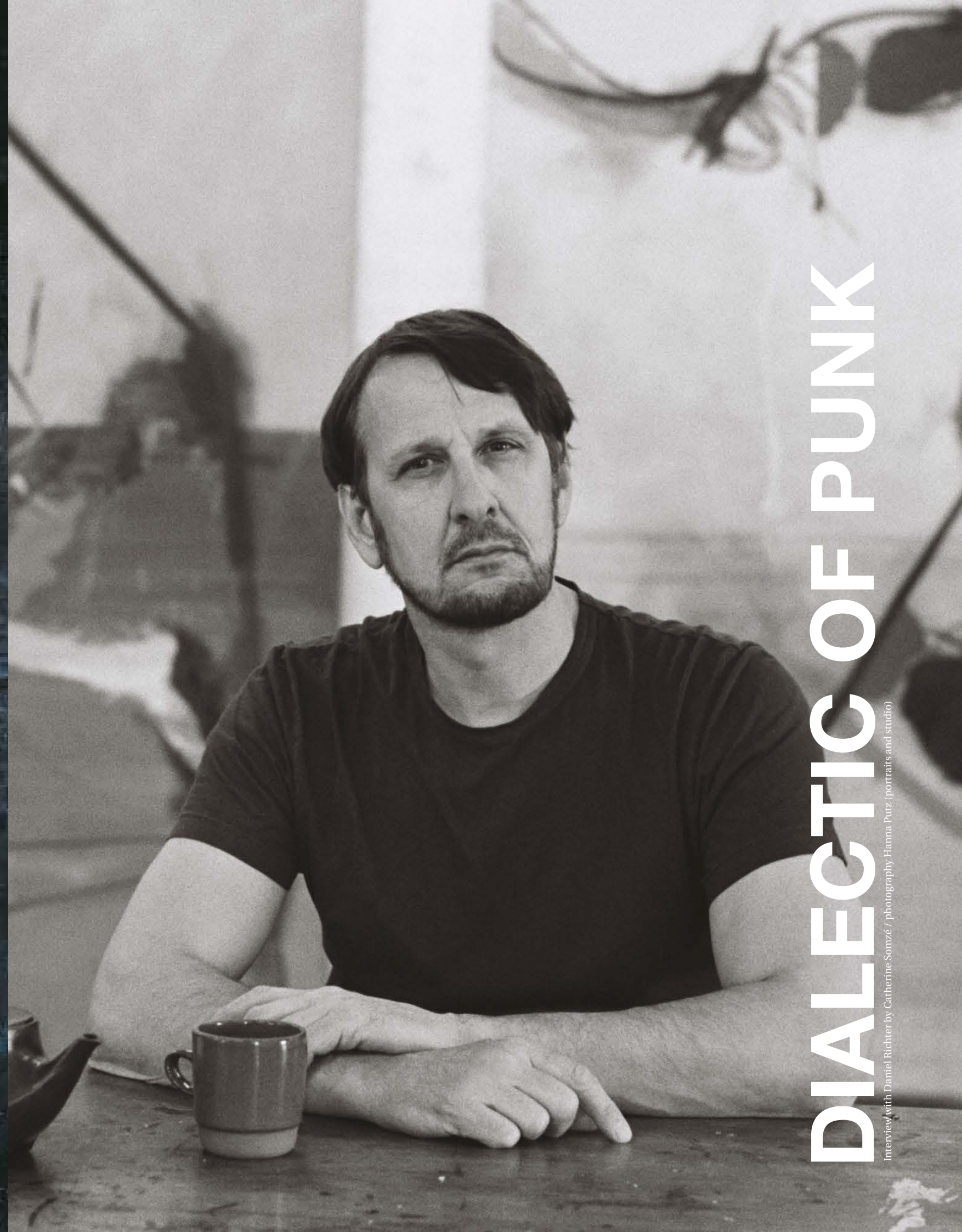




DANIEL RICHTER  
"Tarifa" 2001  
Öl auf Leinwand  
Rückseite signiert datiert  
350 x 280 cm



# DIALECTIC OF PUNK

Interview with Daniel Richter by Catherine Somzé / photography Hanna Putz (portraits and studio)





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**“Inclusion and exclusion is what pornography mainly is about. It's a very common but very hidden fantasy as well. It's ambient. It pervades everything. You cannot just ignore it. It's the lowest common denominator of our culture.”**

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**A squatter turned star artist whose paintings sell for no less than six figures at auction, Daniel Richter has successfully transformed punk disaffection into art. He also owns Buback, one of the oldest underground music labels in Germany, as well as a publishing house together with his partner, Viennese photographer Hanna Putz. It's been a while since Richter has left his paintbrushes behind to work with oil pastels, rollers and painting knives. He still spends as much time as possible in his studio, though, surrounded by birds and music records. Richter keeps his involvement in companies he owns to creative matters only, such as designing sleeves and signing new artists. These are kindred spirits whose attitude resonates with Richter's own. Rebels without a cause who excel at their art, be it Hip-Hop, DIY music or punk rock – individuals committed to making work whatever it takes.**

**To create qualitative art means to be in tune with both the world and oneself though. It also means finding new solutions for age-old problems of form, and understanding ongoing cultural transformations. This is how Richter had come to fame in the early 2000s. His often large-scale, reference-saturated paintings spoke to recent German history as well as investigated new ways of representing the human figure. They also encapsulated the neo-punk zeitgeist of the early 21st century, with its exalted sense of doom. In Goyaesque sceneries, migrants drifted on boats and police clashed with the mob. Richter's characters were modeled from night vision, X-ray and thermal imagery. They stood as if petrified by the heat of flames, or by the all-seeing power of surveillance technology. The painter electrified the art scene.**

**Today, Richter has come back to a visual language much closer to where it all started in the mid-1990s, abstraction. He still however takes cue from aspects of visual culture where violence is present, even if only covertly, such as in porn and cartography. Talking from his studio in Hamburg, he ponders about love, his birds' addiction to tea, and going back to figuration.**







**Catherine Somzé: Are you ready?**

Daniel Richter: Yeah, I’m ready. There are birds flying around. Sometimes they try to attack the telephone. So you’re warned. [Laughs]

**CS: Are you outside?**

DR: No, no. I have small parrots in my studio. I don’t know how you call them in English. I think “lovebirds.” They are a nice company.

**CS: Unless they target the canvases as well! [Laughs]**

DR: They do! They also shit on them but once you paint it over, you can’t see it anymore...

**CS: Involuntary Jackson Pollock’s maybe?**

DR: Painted by nature!

**CS: It was around 2013 that you experienced a kind of fed up with your practice and the type of narrative work that had brought you fame.**

DR: The brain and the subconscious are unstoppable forces, and at some point they confront you with decisions. Sometimes it’s called boredom. You do things and then you just lose interest. It’s not a challenge anymore, artistically. I was coming back from holidays, and there were some paintings lying around in my studio and I just couldn’t finish them. It’s like a love affair. There sometimes comes a point when you find out that the person doesn’t like you anymore. Or you don’t have anything to say to each other. You were producing meaning but then, it stopped. It becomes foul in your mouth...

**CS: You’ve written somewhere that a depression only makes sense afterwards.**

DR: I think it’s taking it a little bit too personal because the relation between a confrontation with oneself and artistic decisions do not necessarily weave into each other. But, for sure, an artistic crisis also relates to the person of the artist. It can definitely turn into a personal problem. Self-doubt, questioning, decisions you make. All kinds of things that have to do with the artist. The more interesting question to me is why people do not get bored with their work more often!

**CS: But that can have quite dire consequences as people expect you to keep on making the same type of work. Don’t buyers want a “Daniel Richter”?**

DR: It’s interesting you mention that. This is the kind of question you ask yourself when you are outside of the game. Some people establish a style and it doesn’t matter if they paint still lives, portraits or make propaganda. But I’m not so much into style, I’m much more into method. At one point, certain formal decisions will lead you to abandon your old style because they do not fit anymore what you want to express or investigate. You need another method. On the other hand, there will always be a red thread running throughout my whole practice. Let me give you an example from music. When you decide to be a noise musician at some point because it’s a step for you, or for the history of music, it’s very hard to get rid of certain harmonic concepts you learned while playing an instrument. You know

what I mean?

**CS: I seem to hear the birds in the background.**

DR: I’m trying to keep them away from the tea. They are obsessed with it!

**CS: Addiction maybe?**

DR: They seem to really enjoy it. I am also wondering whether it’s healthy for them, but then if it’s good for me, how could it be bad for them? Come on, don’t sip from my tea! [Talking to the birds.]

**CS: You were making an analogy with music. Many painters who became well known for their abstractions mentioned music. Think of Kandinsky for instance.**

DR: Yeah, I would think there’s always been a connection but I wouldn’t stretch it so far. I mean there have been painters who had no interest in music. There have been writers who had no interest in music, and musicians who had no interest in art. I think the explanation is social. Artists have more time to listen to music. Only musicians have even more time to listen to music. I mean, who else can be in a studio the whole day long and listen to music?! You know, like explore it, analyze it. You cannot do it when you are at the office, or when you are a student or when you are with others. You cannot say, "I want to listen to Iannis Xenakis right now." Or like, say “the next five days I want to listen to Death Metal just to see what is the point of Death Metal.” But as a painter you can do that! [Laughs]

**CS: You often mention musicians who you really like such as Shostakovich.**

DR: There are very few styles that I wouldn’t have an interest in. I think music is always like art embedded in certain historical, social and political circumstances. All styles of music have had their heydays. Reggae for instance had its glory days, then vanished and transformed into something else. There’s nothing staying there forever. Everything comes back, transubstantiated.

**CS: Let’s go back to your turn to abstraction. You said somewhere that “abstraction as a method of art is very strongly related to the idea of purity, therefore the danger of esotericism lurks around the corner disguised as philosophy.”**

DR: Okay, that observation did change, but the enemy is still disguising itself in some kind of superior being that claims to hold the truth.

**CS: Talking about purity and impurity, you have mentioned pornography as a source of inspiration.**

DR: It’s not like I wanted to make pornographic work or something. The reference to pornography in my recent work is actually very hard to read in it, or at least the work of the last two years I’d say. Most of it is not even based on heterosexual pornography, but rather, from the corner of the eye, gay pornography mainly. Pornography is like a toolbox but in general my main interest lies in contradictions and impurity. It’s a very limited visual language, and how far can I take it? It’s an open game.

**CS: Can pornography be approached as a form of abstraction?**

DR: Pornographic images are not abstract in terms of copying reality of course but they are certainly dealing with vectors of vulgarity and violence. Inclusion and exclusion is what pornography mainly is about. It’s a very common but very hidden fantasy as well. It’s ambient. It pervades everything. You cannot just ignore it. It’s the lowest common denominator of our culture.

**CS: Like maps, another reference in your more recent abstract work.**

DR: One talks of conquest in geopolitical as well as sexual terms. Violence and sexuality are both about domination. There’s also an intimate relation with wrestling, rules and mending. Lots of pornography is very misogynist. The woman is the target of the “real man,” and this macho man is reduced to his penis, one that wants to destroy the woman instead of giving her pleasure. It’s so

full of self-hate.

**CS: You had dealt with pornography before.**

DR: When you’re young you have a certain interest and then you learn from that. It’s not a one-way road. When you think about that later you see that that interest also shaped another interest that relates to that. It’s in a dialectical process. It’s also like that with my work. You pick up pieces you had forgotten. I still use narrative elements in my work. I thought lately I should use that more again actually. I am also thinking about using other tools that I had put aside for the past 10 or 20 years. There’s one big road and main trees, but also the other branches growing and perhaps interweaving again later, perhaps.

**CS: Your abstract work in fact goes back to your early ornamental, graffiti-like work from the mid-1990s. Where it all started.**

DR: It’s true. Sometimes I look at that now and I see sometimes certain observations I had made 20 years ago now come back in a different shape. Then the other way around. I look at the work that I am doing now and something comes to mind that was a disguised problem 20 years ago.

**CS: Could you give an example?**

DR: It’s hard to say, I’m standing in front of two paintings that I just worked on and they remind me of one I did in 1996 or 1997 where I had a similar problem –it’s very boring to describe– it’s a formal decision between backdrop and foreground. Another thing is that I couldn’t have been able to make the narrative work on German history if I hadn’t been a non-narrative artist the five previous years. Because in these five years I explored the possibilities or opportunities of the matter of color, and the different possible languages of destroying and analyzing an image. That enabled me to work as a figurative artist. Without that I think I would have never ended up in that field.

**CS: Do you think it’s possible to make work that does not relate at all to culture and society?**

DR: A work always speaks of the society that produces it, and me, and us. In the 1990s I was more thinking about the chaotic system I lived in, and me not understanding history, and not understanding the history of art. Part of the work I made then was a response to that, me dealing with it. I was trying not to quote because I found it too ironic and I didn’t like that as an attitude. Now, at the beginnings of the 2000s, it was the comeback of social issues. Especially within the German situation, after 10 years of unification,

how did Germany look like? So, yeah, I can’t say what is now the most primary issue but it still has to do with society and influences that shape visual culture and our mind but now that I’ve been working in that field for some years, I’ve learned certain things. It’s more about them being transformed into something beautiful, which I think is what art can do.

**CS: So, the purpose of art should be to transubstantiate ugliness into beauty?**

DR: Somehow. I think most of us need it. Existence is often far from pretty.

**CS: Is there something more you want to share?**

DR: I never know...you always need a punchy end, right. A good statement about the evils of this planet? [Laughs] Something like “Kill the fascists!” or “Stop de war!”

**CS: Sure, we can add that! How are the birds doing?**

DR: Great! They are on my shoulder, dozing after some minutes of excitement.

**CS: They have drunk to much tea?**

DR: Yes, I’m afraid so. Again!

DANIEL RICHTER  
“Army of Traitors” 2011  
Öl auf Leinwand  
200 x 300 cm

“I mean there have been painters who had no interest in music. There have been writers who had no interest in music, and musicians who had no interest in art. I think the explanation is social. Artists have more time to listen to music.”









DANIEL RICHTER  
"Alles Ohne Nichts" 2006 – 2007  
Ölauf Leinwand  
230.3 x 319.9 x 4.5 cm



DANIEL RICHTER  
"Lonely Old Slogan" 2006  
Ölauf Leinwand  
Vorderseite signiert und datiert  
250 x 280.1 x 4.5 cm





DANIEL RICHTER  
 "Mann im Gipfel" 2009  
 Ölauf Leinwand  
 rückseitig betitelt, datiert und signiert  
 70 x 50 cm







DANIEL RICHTER  
"O.O.A. (Gesang mit Löchern)" 2011  
Öl auf Leinwand  
rückseitig signiert, betitelt und datiert  
200 x 300 cm