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Armin Zweite

Gerhard Richter: Life and Work

In Painting Thinking is Painting

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Zum Buch

This superbly illustrated, large format book is the definitive retrospective of Gerhard Richter's genre-defying, boundary-blurring, and constantly evolving oeuvre.

One of the world's most revered visual artists, Gerhard Richter embraces many concepts in his work and continually thwarts categorization. In this expansive and authoritative overview, renowned art historian Armin Zweite leads readers through every phase of Richter's celebrated career including his early artistic education in East Germany and his later prolific output in West Germany: the black and white photo paintings, the brilliantly conceived color charts and lush, inscrutable gray paintings, installations with glass and mirrors, his landscapes, portraits, and still lifes, and his monumental abstract paintings, which broke records at auction. Also included are selections from Richter's larger-scale thematic works, such as Atlas, his ongoing collection of photographs and newspaper clippings, and October 18, 1977, a series of paintings commemorating the lives and deaths of members of a German left-wing terrorist group. The beautiful plates sections feature exquisite reproductions of more than 250 of his most famous works, including Ten Large Color-Charts (1966), Annunciation after Titian (1973), Faust (1980), Skull with Candle (1983), Funeral (1988), Strip (2012), and Double Gray (2014). Throughout, Zweite's clear-eyed commentary offers an expert appraisal of the breadth of Richter's oeuvre. This six-decade monograph of Richter's work is a visually stunning and articulate appreciation by one of the world's foremost experts on the artist and his life.

Autor

Armin Zweite

**ARMIN ZWEITE
GERHARD RICHTER**

armin zweite

gerhard richter
life and work

in painting, thinking is painting

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

If I may apply a famous saying by physiologist Emil Du Bois-Reymond (*ignoramus et ignorabimus*, meaning “we don’t know and we will not know”) to art, it seems that, when it comes to the meaning of Gerhard Richter’s paintings, with their great complexity of subjects, exceptionally varied use of form, and abrupt stylistic twists and ruptures, most people are quick to settle for a sense of *ignorabimus*. A cursory reflection on the now complex explanations and interpretations of his work particularly conveys this in terms of transcending the aesthetic phenomena of Richter’s oeuvre to determine the specific importance of his works within the context of contemporary culture. This was a major problem I viewed with caution when, many months ago, publisher Lothar Schirmer approached me and asked if I would write a book on Gerhard Richter. In other words, I had to select works within a limited framework and compose a suitably distilled text about them. It was almost an equal mix of temptation and challenge. But once I had an initial, provisional draft, I was in need of good advice, given that I had well exceeded the specified limits regarding the number of illustrations and volume of text permitted. My fascination and enthusiasm had rendered these framework specifications null and void—or I had simply chosen to ignore them. After a period of sobriety and reflection, however, the publisher decided not to call for rigorous editing, but rather to run the financial risk and complete the Düsseldorf Trilogy, if you will, with this book dedicated to Gerhard Richter, following on from my publications on Joseph Beuys (1991) and Bernd and Hilla Becher (2003). I must, of course, first thank Gerhard Richter himself for his great trust and support (our first collaboration was back in 1973). Soon after, a publication by Schirmer/Mosel Verlag accompanied an

exhibition at the Lenbachhaus. It was the start of a cooperation on various projects that has spanned more than forty years. It is thus not just for this publication that I am tremendously indebted to Lothar Schirmer. And this is equally true for his long-time editor Birgit Mayer, who expertly and responsibly eliminated all factual inaccuracies and repetitions, as well as linguistic shortcomings. And, last but not least, Regina Kaiser was extremely helpful in solving countless technical problems, going above and beyond to create an impressive overall package of images and words. I therefore feel just as indebted to Angela Motlik-Ernst, who consistently facilitated fast, smooth communications. I also want to mention all the other publishing staff involved in this book, even if their involvement was mostly on a sporadic basis. The fact that I benefited immensely from many authors who have similarly focused on Gerhard Richter’s works has been acknowledged elsewhere in this publication. There is no doubt, however, that the greatest moral support, encouragement, and patience, not to mention sacrifice, over the last few months has come from Monika Steinhauser. And I would therefore like to dedicate this book to my wife, in deep gratitude.

A Z

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INTRODUCTION

"I see myself as the heir to an enormous, great, rich culture of painting, and of an art in general, which we have lost, but which nevertheless is an obligation. In such a situation, it's difficult not to want to restore that culture, or—just as bad—simply to give up, to degenerate."¹ When Gerhard Richter said this in 1986, he was in his mid-fifties. He was able to look back on a slew of national and international successes that culminated in the exhibition *Gerhard Richter, Bilder 1962–1985* at the Städtische Kunsthalle in Düsseldorf at the time, given that this retrospective later toured the National Gallery in Berlin and the Kunsthalle in Bern, before being shown at the Museum moderner Kunst / Museum des 20. Jahrhunderts in Vienna. From a purely external perspective, there was no reason to give up, even though exhibition-goers could wonder whether and to what extent Richter was perpetuating the "great, rich culture of painting." This conundrum seems to have been on his mind when, in 1993–94, another retrospective of his work was presented in four different countries: at the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, at the Kunst- und Ausstellungshalle der Bundesrepublik Deutschland in Bonn, at the Moderna Museet in Stockholm, and at the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía in Madrid.

The series of sweeping reflections would be continued several years later with *Gerhard Richter: Forty Years of Painting*. The project organized by Robert Storr in 2002 to mark the artist's seventieth birthday, meanwhile, once more reminded viewers of the polysemous richness of Richter's works, to such an extent that it, in fact, became nothing less than a victory parade stopping at museums in New York (Museum of Modern Art), Chicago (Art Institute), San Francisco (Museum of Modern Art), and Washington (Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden). When asked at the time how he wanted to be seen, the painter responded almost self-deprecatingly: "Perhaps as a guardian of tradition. I'd prefer that to any other misconceptions."² The US tribute was followed by a European homage ten years later to celebrate the artist's eightieth birthday. It was entitled *Gerhard Richter. Panorama*, and did the rounds of the Tate Modern in London, the Neue Nationalgalerie in Berlin, and the Centre Pompidou in Paris. This project, too, showcased the vast diversity of painterly idioms and the complementarity inherent in Richter's works. Once again the works elicited a great response, some of which was enthusiastic and lasting. If one were to recapitulate the numerous other worldwide exhibitions large and small that focused on specific themes, genres, techniques, or time periods—many of them backed by research and conveying new insights—it can be stated that no other German artist in the second half of the twentieth century achieved an international status comparable to that of Gerhard Richter. In saying as much, we must be aware that exhibitions constitute just one of many aspects on which an artist's reputation is based.

If, in 1986, Richter saw himself as the heir to a great, painterly, albeit long-lost tradition (a view he would continuously confirm over the following decades), the automatic response would be to ask how he would justify his work in a cultural setting marked by rapid changes and profound contradictions, and in the face of great political and social upheavals. The following statement, also from 1986, provides an initial idea: "The plausible theory, that my abstract paintings evolve their motif as the work proceeds, is a timely one, because there no longer exists one central image of the world (world view): We must, therefore, work out everything for ourselves, abandoned as we are on a refuse heap, without center, and without significance; we must cope with the advance of a previously undreamt-of freedom . . . this theory is no less useless than ludicrous should I paint bad pictures."³

While Gerhard Richter was certainly able to take some pleasure in the diagnosis made in 1948 by Hans Sedlmayr in his iconic book *Art in Crisis: The Lost Center, 1957 (Verlust der Mitte)*—to which Richter's expression "lost center" refers—when studying the anti-modernity polemic during his youth, he decisively rejects the therapeutic, archconservative conclusions drawn by the former-Nazi art historian. In any case, the painter's two statements illustrate his dialectic way of thinking, as evidenced here in the polarity of a great cultural heritage on the one hand, and in the deficit caused by a comprehensive loss of meaning on the other. Both statements, repeated in similar form, demonstrate that Richter, like few other artists of the second half of the twentieth century, reflects on the dilemma of his status as a painter, and in so doing consistently articulates the leitmotifs of his work. Many of his self-characterizations revolve around the contrast between tradition and innovation, belief and ideology, engagement and neutrality, self-determination and fatalism, emphasis and control. Equally, comparable contradictions define the vivid nature of his works. Objective subjects compete with abstractions. Gray imagery contrasts with rich colorism. Overt gestures face up to strict formalism. Controlled coincidence is followed by a sense of regularity. Dynamic structures replace closed surfaces. Transparency supersedes opacity. The banal contradicts the beautiful, and indifference counteracts emotion. The singular work prevails over the series.

His work is defined just as much by the fluctuation between opposites: traditional and avant-garde attitudes, between impersonal processes and subjective motivation, between construction and destruction, as it is by the contrast between narration and speechlessness. Suggestion and diminishing comprehensibility may be seen as leitmotifs that pervade the work and create a discourse that repeatedly unleashes a "reflexive potentiation of deceptive beauty" (Klaus Krüger). It is not reality he seeks to put on canvas, but rather "the deceptive semblance of reality," Richter says in 2002.⁴

During his first few years in Düsseldorf and a period of reorientation, Richter evidently came to see his own relationship with his work as ambivalent, just as his work, in turn, owes meaning and truth not just to him, but also to the audience. At the time, this was primarily his artist friends—who did not hold back with their comments—and later also gallery owners, critics, and collectors. The objectification achieved by such critique, be it negative, positive, dismissive, or encouraging, may play a pivotal role in defining and developing one's own artistic conception. Richter experienced this with his coworkers and friends from the 1960s and 1970s in varying degrees of intensity and duration when, during conversations, debates, and joint

activities, he first came into contact with Konrad Lueg (later known as gallery owner Konrad Fischer), Sigmar Polke, and Palermo. Critics and art theorists in particular would adopt this position, first and foremost Benjamin H. D. Buchloh. Such discourse, often quite intense, provided Richter with confirmation or clarification of his artistic ideas and intentions, while others would also reveal irreconcilable dissent.

The many interviews given by the painter over the years also help bring a sense of clarity to his work. His own position has echoed what Pierre Bourdieu wrote about in more general terms in 1970, and lies within an endless network of particular social links between the artist and his interpreters, other artists, but also critics and gallery owners, curators, and exhibition organizers. "A creator's relationship with his work," wrote Bourdieu, "is thus always conveyed by the relationship he has with the system of objective relationships as a result of his position in the intellectual force field, which form the intellectual force field, and which define the public significance of his work; he in turn will recall this through all his relationships with the various authorities in the intellectual world."⁵ One can also, in the words of Niklas Luhmann, state that the institutionalization of art renders it necessary to have artworks engage in "debate" with one another. Art quotes art, copies it, rejects it, or adopts and expands it. In any case, it is constantly reproduced in a cross-referencing context that extends beyond the individual work.⁶ This is quite apparent in Richter's oeuvre.

Gerhard Richter is a very pensive artist, who not only reacts highly sensitively at an aesthetic level, but also thinks in historical terms, and suffuses his imagery with theory. His concerns repeatedly transcend the everyday. As such, he is acutely aware that the future reception of his work will not be decided by his current international reputation nor by any analogies or parallels, and that it is not his own comments, clever statements, nor the number of traditional images that will prove to be relevant, but rather that the historic status of his oeuvre primarily depends on the quality of the images, but then also on their reception. "Without interpretation, we wouldn't even exist."⁷ Like any professional artist, Richter not only strives for attention, recognition, and confirmation, and is curious about the reception of his work; he also endeavors to set a course and, wherever possible, exert influence on current and future appraisals of his output, knowing full well how limited such maneuvers themselves are when they act as neutral documentation. This becomes apparent in a comment from 2002: "I am definitely part of art history; it's my domain, my home."⁸ He underlines this identity with the 1998 offset print *Übersicht* ("Overview"), ranking himself in the phalanx of a long line of writers, musicians, philosophers, and architects, whose output spans several centuries of cultural history. Among them are his most prized painters and sculptors, Beuys, Palermo, Darboven, Genzken, Schütter, Baselitz, and Polke, to name just his German contemporaries, not to mention the other great heroes of the twentieth century, ranging from Picasso, Duchamp, and Pollock to Warhol, Rauschenberg, and Twombly. It is of note that this category contains primarily North Americans and Germans, but hardly any other Europeans.⁹

Gerhard Richter proved to be sufficiently farsighted when, possibly as early as 1969, he began compiling a list of his works created to date, from which he would then gradually draw up a catalogue raisonné. This was printed in various exhibition catalogs in 1986, 1993, and

2005, before the first volume of the six-volume academic catalog of his works, edited by Dietmar Elger, was published in 2011 (volumes 3 and 4 were published in 2013 and 2015 respectively, while volume 2 followed later, in 2017).

In 1999, Dieter Schwarz published *Gerhard Richter, Zeichnungen 1964–1999, Werkverzeichnis. Gerhard Richter, Editionen 1965–2004*, edited by Hubertus Butin and Stefan Gronert, was published in 2004; and a new extended edition followed in 2014.

The title *Gerhard Richter, The Overpainted Photographs. A Comprehensive Catalogue in 6 volumes* has been commissioned.

In 1972, an initial version of the *Atlas* was published in Utrecht under the title of *Atlas van de foto's en schetsen*. It contained reproductions of the photographs and drawings mounted on 340 sheets, just as the artist had collated them as a stock composed of his motifs, concepts, and spatial design ideas. This is another example of how exhibitions spawned an extended version of the compendium—in 1974, 1976, 1989, 1998, and 2006. The *Atlas*, which had now grown to 809 sheets with over 5,000 images, was published in landscape format in four volumes in 2015.

In 1993, Hans-Ulrich Obrist published the book *Gerhard Richter, Text*, which appeared in English two years later under the title *The Daily Practice of Painting*. It encompasses artist's notes, press releases, reader letters and, above all, his many interviews. In 2008, the new edition of the source work had grown to nearly 600 pages. It now serves as the base for all substantive examinations of Richter's work.

Dietmar Elger's biography, *Gerhard Richter, Maler* was published in 2002, and had a third extended and modified edition in 2018. An English translation was published in 2010 (*Gerhard Richter: A Life in Painting*), and is well worth reading.

The Gerhard Richter Archive was established in Dresden in 2006. It is primarily a special library on the artist's life and works, and also contains letters and manuscripts, photographs, films, videos, posters, invitations, press clippings, and much more. Affiliated with the Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden, the archive also owns works which are on loan to the Galerie Neue Meister, also based in Dresden. Run under the careful, dedicated supervision of Dietmar Elger, the archive publishes a first-rate series of texts, now spanning several volumes, aimed at exploring the complete works of Richter.

Finally also worth mentioning in this context are the artist's website (www.gerhard-richter.com), in itself an easily accessible source of vital information and imagery (though managed independently from the artist's studio), and the hugely impressive, enlightening film *Gerhard Richter Painting*, made by Corinna Belz in the span of three years, released in cinemas in 2012.¹⁰ While long shots initially establish the artist in his studio and an environment virtually devoid of discourse, dialogue between Richter and Buchloh adds mediating layers that render the painting process somewhat intelligible, and make its associated intentions comprehensible, and thus logical. The film's special achievement lies not least in its restraint in interweaving both levels so that clarity and conceptuality may subtly complement each other.

This all occurs with the support of the artist, who obviously has a great interest in making facts relating to his work accessible. As such, Richter endeavors to scientifically document and reappraise his oeuvre, so as to prevent all mystery-mongering, speculation, and the creation of legends. Matters of authenticity,

techniques, and provenance are clarified. The exhibition history of his images and sculptures is also covered. Reaction to his work, as it appeared in various media (newspapers, magazines, books, catalogs, television programs, films, etc.), has been captured. Monographs, essays and critiques not only pass down facts, but reflect, in particular, subjective opinions, thereby shaping the perceptions and assessments of his work. Like every artist, Richter—perhaps subconsciously—claims prerogative of interpretation of his work, knowing full well that he can only do so to a limited extent, given that the future is beyond his control. In any case, his ability to initiate art-historical processes consistently and meticulously is notable, since it is normally (if ever) achieved only posthumously, and even then usually much later down the track, and often based on more or less reliable sources. The documentation work by Richter, his studio, and the archive can thus undoubtedly be considered a tremendous asset to fine arts, critics, and indeed the art business. Driven by an unparalleled sense of logic and intensity, Richter's chronicling reveals an attitude of self-reflection that also defines his art. It is not, admittedly, a given that it also constitutes the ultimate interpretation of his work, as evinced by the diverging and sometimes very contradictory interpretations of his oeuvre.

It is obvious why Richter would be concerned about the longevity of his images. His profession, once considered a matter of course, has been called into question in the twentieth century, and Richter himself wonders whether painting is indeed still possible and viable. He is not alone in his concerns, as evidenced by the increasing analytical scrutiny of painting as a profession in the 1970s. Then, painting had seemed to enter a phase of reflection in relation to its cultural and aesthetic conditions; the relevant section of the 1977 *documenta 6* focused on this issue.¹¹ Everything was now being challenged. Should an artist's work be objective or abstract, linear or pictorial, two-dimensional or three-dimensional, monochrome or multi-colored, and so on? What is the role of photography? Who is the intended audience of oil-on-canvas works, and what purpose do static images serve in a media-centered world? Answers need to be found to these and many other questions, although it is uncertain how long such answers and decisions will be valid. Quite possibly, alternatives need to be examined and repeatedly re-examined. On a very general level, we can see how cultural energies that had charged the artistic movements of the 1960s shifted increasingly into the realm of theory in the 1970s. The debate over what was considered postmodern intensifies toward the end of that decade.

And Richter does not remain unaffected. Recapitulating the various phases and themes of his own creations causes such ongoing uncertainty and unsettling helplessness that, while he does consider it imperative to refocus his work, he cannot see any way out of the dilemma. In a letter to Buchloh, dated May 23, 1977, Richter expresses general doubts about his artistic work.¹² In this key document, he radically questions his previously pursued objectives because, he believes, they had often only resulted in symbolic kitsch and pure decoration, and are primarily characterized by nostalgia, indifference, coincidence, folly, or caprice. Indeed, his oeuvre features a constant coexistence of different stylistic and thematic focuses. Still, Richter reliably finds convincing high-quality solutions, despite the heterogeneous approaches and divergent subjects in his oeuvre. In the end, he confidently sidesteps the risk of failure, and as such, there are no dead ends in

his work, only recurring sets of motifs and work strategies. These are invariably pursued for a time, before he shifts focus and changes the direction and process in order to resume—sometimes years or even decades later—works he had once started but never finished, transform them, and go with them. The search “for the object,” “for our image,” is perpetuated, because Richter is driven by the desire to “get an idea of what's going on.” And this image, in its totality, can only ever be complex, multi-faceted, and contradictory.

From this perspective, the complete body of work of Gerhard Richter, which appears multifaceted to the extent of being confusing at first glance, is not based on one single, harmonious, goal-oriented conception of art. Rather, it is based on a web of logical intentions and consistent ideas about the possibilities offered by painting and art at a time of total loss of utopia and the absolute dominance of instrumental thought. In a world where every artistic gesture and every aesthetic moment is directly or indirectly influenced by the dictates of economics and growth, maintaining and pursuing a clear, constant attitude has almost ceased to be possible or credible. This is because anything that today appears wise and necessary, and promises success, is already rendered outmoded and fusty tomorrow thanks to the rapid changes in all key parameters. Richter was educated and socialized in the German Democratic Republic (GDR, East Germany). Once in Düsseldorf (in West Germany), he was particularly influenced by Fluxus and Pop Art, later also Conceptual and Minimalist Art, and not least by digitization infiltrating all areas of life. It was these experiences that quickly made him realize how consistent attitudes manifest in a specific, quasi-inalterable style, as well as in a limited arsenal of motifs, would possess no legitimacy and, therefore, also no future.

This means, however, that the model of coherent, artistic development so popular and prevalent in biographic writing does not bear fruit when it comes to describing Gerhard Richter's work. It only seems to make sense when using the sequence of his life events as one's base, attributing examples of his work to these phases as their graphic illustrations. Dietmar Elger took this into account in his 2002 biography *Gerhard Richter, Maler*. The result is a highly factual, enormously vivid portrayal where even the most important works are acknowledged in a concise, succinct manner. Ultimately, the artist's complex figure emerges rather impressively from the backdrop of his multi-faceted work, a work that is characterized by constant transgressive innovations. Even Elger, however, cannot help but notice that, when it comes to Richter, it is not about an autonomous development of a single, inalterable essence, or consistent creations with perpetual, unpredictable novelty character, but rather that, as implied, we are observing a constant seesaw over the course of more than half a century, a motion which discounts neither foreshadowing nor back-referencing. In the late 1960s, Klaus Honnef already described Richter's creative work as “a permanent break in style as a principle of style.”¹³

The sudden coexistence of heterogeneous attitudes suggests Richter would probe all conceivable options and go from one extreme to the other. The causes for this fundamental uncertainty lie partly in the fact that, whereas the historic avant-garde movements from Cubism onward may not have destroyed art as an institution, they did progressively undermine the possibility of permanently asserting the validity of aesthetic norms with any permanency. His general view being one shaped equally by skepticism and resoluteness,

Richter finds himself in good company when we reflect on the heterogeneity and volatility, the contradictions and emphatic reorientations, as well as the frequent shifts between different media, in the lifeworks of Andy Warhol (1928–87) and Robert Rauschenberg (1925–2008). The resoluteness to constantly explore new options, to transcend boundaries, and to avoid routine of any kind is what connects Richter to the most important artists of the twentieth century.

In this context, it is worth remembering that Peter Bürger's incredibly influential *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (*Theorie der Avant-Garde*) was published in Germany in 1974, and enriched and shaped critical discourse for years, if not decades. One of Bürger's theories states that the avant-garde movement prior to World War I transformed a historical succession of representations and styles into a simultaneity of the radically heterogeneous. Ever since, no artistic movement has been able to lay legitimate claim to being more progressive than others. Also emergent is an awareness of the ineffectiveness of autonomous art, particularly given that sublation in the Hegelian sense, that is the translation of art into real life, took hold only in sub-areas, and even then only temporarily.¹⁴ Richter's depressing summary from 1977, as detailed in the aforementioned letter to Buchloh, takes this into account on a subjective level, and evokes not only a sense of uncertainty and disorientation, but at the same time the decisive will to overcome this particular state.

Aside from this development within the world of art, one must also bear in mind the collapse of German civilization under the Nazi regime—in other words, the Holocaust and its traumas. The horrendous level of destruction, the unspeakable suffering, and the many dead of World War II cut deep wounds that would long refuse to heal. For a prolonged time, the Cold War period dominated political and social consciousness, at the same time shaping the intellectual climate. Coupled with this were the nuclear threat and the collapse of socialism, as well as climate change and the uncertainties of nuclear technologies (Chernobyl). In 1985, Jürgen Habermas encapsulates the crisis of the welfare state and the exhaustion of utopian energies as "the new obscurity."¹⁵ Other observable phenomena include an increase in undemocratic turbo-capitalism, the rise in religiously motivated fanaticism and the resulting terrorism (9/11), not to mention the proxy wars in the Middle East, growing migration, and grave worldwide social dislocation with devastating consequences. On the other hand, the ever-expanding digitization and automation of entire environments are not just boosting efficiency; in some cases, their spread also entails disastrous consequences. Added to this are the upswing in populist movements, democracy in crisis, and the spreading and strengthening of autocratic structures and regimes.

To the backdrop of such an overall and profound loss of trust, subjects forfeited their identity and were virtually forced to seek refuge in a masquerade of shifting identities. References to the "death of the subject" in the late 1960s delivered a temporary key to understanding the present, and this stood to reason, for the subject was the central category of modernity.¹⁶ With all that was necessary to construct the ego beginning to unravel and dissolve, it was not hard to align with Michel Foucault, who, in 1966, wrote that "one can certainly wager that man would be erased, like a face drawn in the sand at the edge of the sea."¹⁷ In this context, Richter does not emerge as the erratic individual who constantly changes convictions and views to fit

the zeitgeist. Instead, and in the face of all the ruptures and contradictions of his oeuvre, he remains authentic, his complexity evoking a fundamental openness and intricacy as well as multiperspectivity. These are syndromes which significantly shaped, and continue to shape, the twentieth and early 21st century. The abrupt changes of style which define his habitus, and which are perhaps owed to the axiomatics of schemata, can be seen as a coupling of both considerations and objectives, and of coincidence and spontaneity. The issue of the profession's legitimacy, however, constantly hovers in the background. It is not just painting that is deemed problematic and obsolete; the right of art itself to exist is often called into question.

It is hardly surprising that, eventually, the end of painting was declared in the early 1980s.¹⁸ And soon after, Arthur C. Danto's essay "The End of Art" served as the introduction to the book entitled *The Death of Art*, edited by Berel Lang and published in New York in 1984.¹⁹ But painting proved to be extraordinarily resilient, perhaps because, as was demonstrated at the documenta 6, it elevated its own prerequisites to the status of subject, while also addressing a sense of doubt by asserting its own existence. Gerhard Richter's oeuvre is testament to this inherent problem like the works of few others. It is almost as if his works embody the answers articulated as questions during the process of their creation. As such, the artist also grieves the loss of possibilities of the medium. His extensive revision of a historically outdated model of visual differentiation of experience is, perhaps, also revealing the potential, as it were, to resist the factual accumulation of such experiences in the present-day event-oriented culture.

In view of such assumptions, it would be remiss not to approach Richter's work in a variety of ways. Very few viewpoints are exemplary in this context, and these are primarily the ones that played a role in my own reflections. Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, who has monitored the painter's work and commented on it for decades, and whose profound analyses sometimes land him in conflict because he does not see Richter's impressive works as meeting his expectations of critical, enlightening art, describes the abstract images as having a "deeply anamnestic character." In his opinion, Richter is repeating the history of abstraction strategy by strategy, technique by technique, paradigm by paradigm. "The lost history of (abstract) painting itself becomes both the subject and the process of graphic anamnesis here, and all bans previously imposed on painting by modernism (no expression, no gestures, no illustration . . .) are once again examined."²⁰ Richter did not embrace this interpretation of his work; instead, he allocated to art a "therapeutic, consolatory and informative, investigative and speculative function . . . it is thus not only existential pleasure but Utopia."²¹ During a conversation in 2000, he is also quoted as saying: "I can't find anything exact, but he mentions 'painting beautiful pictures' quite a few times so I think this should be fine as is."²² In 1982, he writes that "art is the highest form of hope,"²³ a phrase he would repeat in his conversation with Buchloh in 2004.²⁴

Unlike Buchloh, Robert Storr focused primarily on the notion of perception in his substantive and immensely detailed analyses of Gerhard Richter's works. The pictures, he writes, claim their authority as representations of recognizable themes, while simultaneously highlighting the use of pictures to accentuate what transcends our everyday experience. Purely seeing things does not, however, shed any light on things as they really are. We can be equally uncertain of our

genres have been omitted. As such, the works he was able to finish during and after his training at the Dresden Academy of Fine Arts, that is, still in East Germany, were disregarded. The research conducted by Jeanne Anne Nugent, Christine Mehring, Dietmar Elger, John J. Curley, and others has, in recent years, revealed and explained many enlightening facts; a few exceptions aside, however, these have minimal aesthetic relevance to the artworks created from 1962 onward. Richter's graphic works are similarly disregarded, as are the Editions (which comprise a large part of his oeuvre) and most of the many exceptionally interesting books by the artist. This publication highlights the many facets of an extremely rich oeuvre. The mentions of specific works or larger groups of works do not claim to serve as a complex or all-encompassing recognition thereof. The focus of this book is not on the coherence of Gerhard Richter's works, but on the heterogeneity of his strategies. It does not seek to examine the whole, but rather to zero in on certain aspects and their respective transformations over shorter or longer periods of time. The multi-layered output of Gerhard Richter features thematic, functional, material, and genre-based equivalences. Noticeable, furthermore, are constant progressions and artistic overbiddings, which are counteracted by negations and erasures. The objective world, as a benchmark and as a point of reference, remains noticeable at all times, often as horror, though sometimes also heralding hope and fortune, while abstraction, in all its forms and manifestations, repeatedly challenges the painter anew. Much of the earlier literature on Richter's oeuvre refers to visual discourse. This certainly makes sense, and helps readers to better understand Richter's complex work. Many paintings, however, appear so overwhelming in their presence that they simply leave an audience speechless.

Breaking his work down into genre and subject is problematic, since repetition is unavoidable. This book

solely portrays various facets of a highly differentiated body of work, which viewers and readers will want to complete and expand on with their own observations and considerations. The observations made in this book owe a lot to the comments by the artist himself (available in the book *Text*) on the one hand, and to the many analyses and interpretations of his work (available in monographic books, exhibition catalogs, magazines, anthologies, etc.) on the other. I thus feel indebted to numerous authors, particularly given the fact that I was able to obtain facts and suggestions from their texts, or would concur with many of their conclusions. As such, it is clearly impossible to name all those whose writings and considerations served as inspiration for me. The few that I do list here are those whose research, documentations, interpretations, or theoretic reflections were particularly helpful to me or prompted me to contradict, draft alternatives, or add my own thoughts. For the sake of simplicity and equality, I shall list them in groups in alphabetical order: Hubertus Butin, Dietmar Elger, Stefan Gronert, Hans Ulrich Obrist should be mentioned as should, in particular, Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, Florian Klinger, Birgit Pelzer, Dieter Schwarz, and Robert Storr. Added to that there are John J. Curley, Georges Didi-Huberman, Susanne Ehrenfried, Helmut Friedel, Julia Friedrich, Julia Gelshorn, Stefan Germer, Eckhart Gillen, Marlies Grüterich, Jürgen Harten, Markus Heinzemann, Kai-Uwe Hemken, Martin Henatsch, Klaus Honnef, Astrid Kasper, Klaus Krüger, Susanne Küper, Ulrich Loock, Christine Mehring, Guido Meincke, Ingrid Misterek-Plagge, Jeanne Anne Nugent, Dietmar Rübél, Uwe M. Schneede, Kaja Silverman, Gregor Stemmrich, Rolf Wedewer, and Ulrich Wilmes, among others. That this is merely a fraction of the authors to have tackled Richter's works over the years is purely due to the sheer and almost unwieldy number of publications that exist about Gerhard Richter and his oeuvre.

1. THE EARLY YEARS

DRESDEN

Gerhard Richter left East Germany in the spring of 1961. Nearly thirty years of age, excellently educated, and successful as a painter in Dresden and its surroundings, he also appeared to have a financially secure future, given his degree of social integration, his political obscurity, and his innocuous relationship with the state authorities. The artist's decision to move to West Germany despite all this was based less on ideological or economic factors than on artistic grounds. His success there had been steadily progressing both nationally and internationally since the early 1970s, while relatively little was known about his background, his family, friends, and co-workers, or his studies and creations from his East German days.

The fact that Gerhard Richter had painted large, publicly accessible murals and participated in various exhibitions in Dresden, did not seem to interest anyone in West Germany, and the artist himself felt no compulsion to recount his experiences, or talk about the work he had undoubtedly left behind in East Germany. Instead, his focus was on striving to find his footing in the new, initially irritatingly foreign, environment of Düsseldorf, reorientate himself, break into the very different artistic world, hold his own there, and, of course, make a living. Over the last ten or fifteen years, however, this has changed dramatically insofar as public interest in his early years has grown continuously. Although these aspects are not detailed further in this book, I believe it is necessary to at least recapitulate a few salient facts, which no doubt subliminally contributed to shaping his artistic, and sometimes also his political, views.¹

Richter was born in Dresden in February 1932. His mother, who came from a bourgeois family, trained as a bookseller, while the man whom Richter believed to be his biological father until only a few years ago was a teacher who, in 1936, having long been unemployed, found another job in a town then known as Reichenau, near Zittau. Richter's sister, Gisela, was born here. Despite being a member of the National Socialist German Workers' Party, or NSDAP (a.k.a. the Nazi Party), Richter's father was not an overt sympathizer. According to Richter, the family appears to have been rather apolitical. Though he himself was forced to join the Hitler Youth, he managed to dodge the paramilitary youth camps and associated marches. His mother, who was interested in and broad-minded toward music and culture, missed Dresden, and projected her own ideals and unfulfilled hopes on Gerhard, her favorite child. As an adolescent, Richter began immersing himself in the German classics and Nietzsche. During the war, during which his father was a soldier, the family moved from Reichenau to Waltersdorf, a town of about 2,500 people which Richter found a dreary place. It was here that he was living when the war ended, and, to this day, he can recall playing adventure games with rifles and pistols that were lying around. When his father returned from a US prisoner-of-war

camp, he was unable to return to his profession due to his former Nazi Party membership, and had to spend years eking out a meager living in precarious jobs before eventually finding employment offering a moderate wage at a machine factory.

Richter himself was forced to finish his schooling with only an intermediate high-school certificate as, in East Germany, his parents were classified as part of the educated bourgeoisie whose offspring were heavily disadvantaged in favor of the children of workers and farmers when it came to education. Richter began to grow increasingly interested in painting, and thus seized the opportunity to look on as a fresco was painted at his primary school in Waltersdorf. Inspired by the skilled manual technique, he sought him out and showed him his first attempts at painting, presumably creations from the evening classes he had been attending. Drawing motivation from the cultural liberality and spirit of optimism prevalent in the post-war years, Richter was now also reading works by authors who had been persecuted in the Third Reich, such as Lion Feuchtwanger, Thomas Mann, and Stefan Zweig. Despite harboring many different career ambitions after graduating from commercial college, he was unable to pursue any due to the fact that he had not completed the school-leaving certificate that qualified him to study at a university. Interim stints at an advertising agency and the paint shop of the Zittau municipal theater followed. But though Richter claimed in the 1960s to have held the position of photography laboratory assistant, he never did. After aborting his apprenticeship as a signwriter and scene painter, he applied to the Dresdener Hochschule für Bildende Künste, but was not admitted straightaway. Instead, he had to take a circuitous route and work temporarily as a painter in a factory, before being able to take up his studies in decorative painting and commercial art during the 1951–52 winter semester.² The training was highly regimented, beginning at eight o'clock in the morning. In addition to practical lessons, which included painting techniques, knowledge of materials, the studying of nudes, and composition, great emphasis was also placed on theory, such as art history, aesthetics, political economics, and the theory of Marxism-Leninism. Socialist Realism was the declared objective. Any attempts to water down the doctrine and discuss alternative models were swiftly suppressed. Italian painters such as Renato Guttuso and Gabriele Mucchi were, however, still considered acceptable, since their positive reputation was primarily owed to their political involvement. The appreciation of Picasso in East Germany was similarly rooted in this notion, for he had joined France's Communist Party in 1944. Compared to easel-based images, Richter found murals to offer much greater creative freedom, as they focused more on decorative and ornamental aspects rather than attention to detail. On the other hand, however, their public visibility meant they were frequently governed by thematic and propagandistic requirements—as Richter soon found out.

Richter faced up to the course tasks and mandatory lectures, while also surrendering to the "more attractive trials of modern art." This two-pronged approach would define his entire studies. It was during this time that Richter met Marianne Eufinger, who was attending classes in fashion. Ema, as she was known, had participated in the uprising of June 17, 1953, and was consequently expelled from the university in Berlin-Weissensee where she had moved, instead having to complete her studies at the Fachhochschule für Gestaltung (design college) in Heiligendamm. Her

his experiences during the Stalinist era. Herrfurth flees the state when he discovers that overregulated everyday life in East Germany offers no prospects for his individualist lifestyle. This novel also received a tremendous response, though—for obvious reasons—the reaction was much stronger in East than West Germany. On stage, Bertolt Brecht in particular sparked controversy in the West, his references to his communist views sometimes getting him banned there. Heinrich von Brentano, the West German Minister for Foreign Affairs at the time, compared Brecht to Horst Wessel, the lyricist of the Nazis' stormtrooper march, simply because he did not share the author's political views. His lack of apology appeared to indicate that intellectual horizons in West Germany were beginning to cloud over.⁴³ In the world of popular music meanwhile, the early rock 'n' roll stars were increasingly being relegated to the background by the unparalleled success of the Beatles and the Rolling Stones.

This period gave rise to a generation whose indifference toward society could also be regarded as critical distance. The renowned *Magnum* magazine—unrelated to the photographic cooperative of the same name—dedicated a special edition to this phenomenon, in which the editors lamented the lack of youth involvement, labeling the young generation “the junior partners of a well-functioning meritocracy.”⁴⁴ The feature claimed that this deficient or, indeed, non-existent identity was embodied in unprecedented indifference to everything and everyone. The “new beginnings” that could soon be observed in all kinds of areas of life in fact often pursued no other purpose than that of self-discovery.

Given the complexity of the circumstances, which have only been touched on briefly here, one cannot help but wonder what Richter made of this social, intellectual, and artistic milieu, with its commotions, dislocations, shocks, and disruptions; what affected him, what he reacted to, and how he did so. In early May 1961, Richter had just returned to Düsseldorf following a visit to his in-laws when he found himself in a mental slump with no clear prospects.⁴⁵ Yet his situation began to change soon after. Even though he had completed a diploma in mural painting at the Dresdener Akademie, he now re-enrolled for study and was admitted into the class of Professor Ferdinand Macketanz at the Düsseldorfer Kunstakademie. He was also encouraged by the fact that he was able to sell one of his hastily painted still lifes. While he may not have been able to benefit tremendously from his craft as a trained painter in Düsseldorf, he was able to acquaint himself with the sometimes opaque mechanisms of the art system that was gradually emerging. In any case, the academy gave him the opportunity to work in a studio there, albeit usually alongside others.

As an East German refugee, he was additionally entitled to apply for a scholarship, which he was granted. Immensely important also was the regular contact with other classmates, most of whom were not only much younger than Richter, but also often had very different interests. On May 22, 1961, while spending time with his wife and in-laws in Sanderbusch over the Pentecost period, he wrote to Helmut and Erika Heinze in Radebeul: “There’s so much to tell you. About art, about the realists, and about the abstractionists, about the West and about the East, about Adenauer, about West Germans, about how things are going, and about how wonderful, how amazing everything is. That’s how it is. I am very happy to be here. And I’m happy that, before, I was over there.”⁴⁶

In a letter dated May 24, 1961, to Wieland Förster, a sculptor who had stayed in East Germany, he emphatically states: “I am happy to be here . . . I am pleased to find that I have never so single-mindedly considered painting to be my vocation the way I do here now . . . It will be my profession that controls my lifestyle, not the other way around, as was usually the case in Dresden . . . Everything has changed, everything has intensified, and, in general, I am confident.”⁴⁷ While in Paris in late June, Richter describes the city to be an “overwhelming experience,”⁴⁸ but fails to mention what exactly he found so captivating. Richter paints at the Akademie, but feels rather depressed at the state of things there, finding the other students undisciplined or lazy, and the nude model to be unsuitable. In November, monetary problems sour the mood. And in December, he writes: “I didn’t realize how unbelievably different it is here; it’s something you need to experience for yourself. (But make no mistake; I mean this as anything but a complaint).”⁴⁹ Richter once again reports of financial difficulties, which would plague him constantly over the following years, repeatedly forcing him to take up temporary jobs, such as occasionally designing the life-size caricatures for the floats during the Düsseldorf carnival processions.

Richter often goes to the cinema during this time. He finds Antonioni’s *The Night* to be “wonderfully boring and, in a way, pointless. It appears to me to be an initial sign of the times: Making things that are pointless, immoral, and uneducational, that have no higher purpose. The images, the music, the plays. It is all the same everywhere (not that this grieves me at all).”⁵⁰ Such experiences denote the opposite of what the East German socialist state was all about, namely, to use art to take a stance, to interpret the meaning of history in the socialist sense, or to commit oneself to an ultimately petit-bourgeois utopia, and to argue on the basis of morals.⁵¹

On December 11, 1961, he writes about what he painted during the semester vacation and the month of November: “Yesterday I photographed all my pictures, approximately sixty of them; half can definitely be discounted—they are not large-format (ranging from 30 x 40 to 100 x 70). Most feature small figures, nudes, sitting and standing, or even just a blotch, very little color.”⁵² Four pictures he includes in the letter as small sketches can be identified in one of the photographs⁵³ Richter took of a wall hung with his work during a semester exhibition in February 1962. Two are easily identifiable as figures, vaguely reminiscent of Alberto Giacometti and perhaps even Francis Bacon, while the two others are unidentifiable. It is very clear that Richter fluctuated between figural abstraction and Informalist painting. No direct reactions to what he may have experienced in Düsseldorf are apparent.

In early 1962, Richter rented a small apartment to allow his wife to join him in Düsseldorf. During the annual academy exhibition, Gerhard Richter, Manfred Kuttner, Konrad Lueg, and Sigmar Polke all got to know one another, and all moved to Karl Otto Götz’s class (“a national great among abstractionists”)⁵⁴ the following semester. Lueg had previously been under the tutelage of Bruno Goller, while Kuttner and Polke had studied under Gerhard Hoehme, to whom Polke would return a year later. Looking back, Richter emphasized the importance of working together. “Contact with like-minded painters—a group—means a great deal to me; nothing comes in isolation. We have worked out our ideas largely by talking them through . . . One depends on one’s surroundings. And so the exchange with other artists—and especially the

