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A Note on Gerhard Richter's

October 18, 1977

BENJAMIN H. D. BUCHLOH

Even amnesia suffers from the compulsion of being unable to forget; that is what we call repression.

—Jürgen Habermas, “Keine Normalisierung der Vergangenheit”

The group of paintings entitled October 18, 1977 that Gerhard Richter completed in the late fall of 1988 immediately confronts its viewers with the question of the very possibility of representing history, both in contemporary painting and in modernism in general. Despite their apparent continuity with Richter’s early photopaintings,¹ these paintings in fact constitute the first attempt in Richter’s oeuvre to address historically specific public experience. The two earlier series of paintings that one could most easily identify as the precedent for the new series would be the Eight Student Nurses (1966) and the 48 Portraits (1971–72). As depictions of recent murder victims,² on the one hand, and as presentations of figures of public history, on the other, however, a comparison with these two groups instantly clarifies their distance and their difference from the paintings October 18, 1977. 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 taboo against remembering this particular episode of recent German history—the activities of the Baader-Meinhof Group and the murder of its members in Stammheim Prison—distinguish these paintings from all earlier works by Richter.

That this group of paintings was first exhibited in a building by Mies van

1. Photopainting is the term Richter uses for that type of painting—appearing in his oeuvre since 1962—based on the projection of found photographs.
2. Eight Student Nurses is a group of portraits based on newspaper images of the victims of the Chicago mass murderer Richard Speck.
der Rohe seems an appropriate historical accident, for Mies is the architect who constructed the only German contribution to public monumental sculpture in the twentieth century, devoting it to the memory of the philosopher Rosa Luxemburg and the revolutionary Karl Liebknecht, both of whom had been murdered by the Berlin police. This coincidence establishes a continuity between a bourgeois architect in the Weimar state of the 1920s and a bourgeois painter in the West Germany of the 1980s. And indeed both artists differ from most of their contemporaries in their ability to tolerate, in public view, challenges to the very political and economic system with which they identify as artists. Moreover, through their acts of aesthetic commemoration, they resist the constantly renewed collective prosecution of those victims in the form of their eradication from current memory, thereby dignifying the victims of a state whose opponents they had become because of their public challenge.

The first temptation is to respond to the shock these paintings generate with an art-historical reflex, deflecting their impact by an excursion into the history of history painting. This is especially true because two works within October 18, 1977 (Funeral and Dead Woman) seem explicitly to establish a reference to two of the central images from the complex prehistory of the destruction of history painting in the nineteenth century.4

But the history of history painting is itself a history of the withdrawal of a subject from painting's ability to represent, a withdrawal that ultimately generated the modernist notion of aesthetic autonomy. In this development, forms of traditional representation were divided into, on the one hand, a referential function based on resemblance (a function that photography would increasingly and more convincingly assume beginning in the mid-nineteenth century) and, on the other, the complementary formation, that of a liberation of painterly means, whose lasting and only triumph was to become the systematic negation of the functions of representation. In their refusal either to give up painting for photography tout court or to accept the supposed lucidity of photography's focused gaze, Richter's photopaintings have consistently opposed the universal presence of that gaze and its ubiquitous instrumentalization of the look. This has particular importance within the group October 18, 1977 in relation to a gaze that, in the police-commissioned press photographs that served Richter as a point of departure, seems ritualistically to assure itself of the final liquidation of the enemies of the state. But at the same time this group resists the modernist restriction of painting to a mediation of historical experience exclusively in the discursive

3. Oktober 18, 1977 was first shown at the Museum Haus Esters, Krefeld; see the catalogue Gerhard Richter/18. Oktober 1977, Cologne, Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, 1988, in which the present text originally appeared together with essays by Stefan Germer and Gerhard Storch.

4. The former has inevitable associations with Courbet's Burial at Ornans (1849–50), the latter with Manet's Dead Toreador (1864).
Dead Woman (2). 1988.
Dead Woman (3). 1988.
reflection on the evolution, the materials, and the procedures of the pictorial medium itself. It is in the construction of this dilemma, marked by both the conflict in medium—painting/photography—and the conflict in ideas about representability—the painting's self-referentiality/photography's "transparency" to the event—that Richter's work testifies to the contemporary difficulties in the production of historical representation in painting.

The inability of painting to represent contemporary history resulted first of all from the transformation of historical experience into an experience of collective catastrophe. It therefore seemed that only photography, in its putative access to facticity and objectivity, could qualify as an instrument of historical representation. Secondly, insofar as catastrophe democratizes historical experience, it also destroys the artistic claim to a privileged mode of seeing and of historical interpretation. This has become most evident in the work of Andy Warhol, in which the long and complicated process of the democratic experience of catastrophe and the mechanical representation of death are integrated. In his work, heroes and victims are equally the objects of photographic representation; their only difference lies in the distinction between "famous deaths and anonymous deaths." The nearly unbearable cruelty of the photographic detail in Warhol's paintings (Warhol selected archival photos of accidents which had even been rejected as unpublishable by the tabloids), goes hand in hand with the laconic and affectless execution of the representation. The de-differentiation of the artistic process corresponds to the arbitrary fatality and the utter desublimation of the experience of death.

Since the mid-1960s Richter has been engaged in a dialogue with Warhol's painting, a dialogue in which the differences have been occasionally obscured by an emphasis on the parallels between their points of departure. The construction of an "iconography of death" by art historians concerned with this period—an "iconography" that supposedly links the work of the two artists—has especially failed to clarify how Richter's 48 Portraits should be distinguished from Warhol's 13 Most-Wanted Men (1964). Nor is this construction able to address the manner in which the new series, October 18, 1977, redeems this dialogue with the 1960s, especially the implied annihilation in Warhol's work of the last possibility of constructing historical memory through the means of painting.

In distinct contrast to Warhol's work, the victims in Richter's recent paintings are not the victims of anonymous accidents, but are agents within a historically specific moment. In further contrast to Warhol's, Richter's paintings do not affirm collective amnesia of the experience of death; rather they attempt to construct a pictorial representation of the act of recalling and understanding personal experience in its relation to history. In this respect Richter's paintings constitute a European inversion of Warhol's position of anonymity with regard to history. Inasmuch as they emphasize the individual's capacity to act (both that of the individuals depicted and that of the individual depicting, the painter), they insist on this capacity as a necessary condition of contemporary artistic
production. In that respect *October 18, 1977* resembles the representation of Stephen Biko, the South African revolutionary, in Hans Haacke’s work *Voici Alcan* (1983), a relationship which Richter’s painting generally would not have called to mind.

If Richter’s *October 18, 1977* works reflect the difficulties of painting to engage now in the representation of contemporary history, their very unexpected commitment to historical subject matter also comments implicitly on other contemporary practices of history painting in Germany. Clearly Richter’s struggle with the issue of historical representation begins in his assumption that the historical dimension of painting is primarily the discursive history of the medium. By contrast, recent German history painting, the type of “polit-kitsch” produced by a new generation of German artists, has no such struggle to contend with, since it appears to insist that the negation of historical representation in twentieth-century painting was at best a brief interlude, a failure that has to be redressed—as though such artists as Mondrian and Newman had voluntarily deprived themselves of the capacity to represent the “historical.”

5. “It seems that the one attitude starts from the assumption that the work of distanciation and comprehension opens up a space for commemoration and the autonomous confrontation with ambivalent historical legacies, while the other attitude would like to employ a revisionist history in order to revamp its concept of traditional identity for the sake of reconstituting a national history” (Jürgen Habermas, “Apologetische Tendenzen,” in *Eine Art Schadensabwicklung*, Frankfurt/Main, Suhrkamp, 1987, p. 153). Anselm Kiefer is only the most prominent of the German artists who have modeled themselves on concepts that Habermas has defined as “traditional identity.” In the course of their restoration of these concepts, these artists have produced a type of work—now widely disseminated and producing its own kind of fall-out in North America as well—that can best be identified as polit-kitsch. Its attraction seems not only to be its reconstitution of traditional identity for the generation of West Germans who wish to abandon the long and difficult process of reflection upon a post-traditional identity. The attraction of polit-kitsch also appears to be—and herein lies its international appeal—its reconstitution of the *artistic* privilege associated with the traditional identity, i.e., the claim to have privileged access to “seeing” and “representing” history.

During the planning stages of the recent Anselm Kiefer retrospective—the largest and most important commitment, ever, to a postwar European artist by the four major American museums involved—one of the curators gave me an unforgettable answer to a naive question. Having asked whether, as an art historian, he did not first feel the need to exhibit the work of a major artist of the ‘60s generation—an artist such as Gerhard Richter—before according such an enormous retrospective to a relatively young artist of the current generation, he said briskly, “Kiefer is sexier than Richter.” The quip has stayed with me for several reasons. First, it constituted my initial encounter with the language of the new managerial type of curator, a type that has increasingly replaced the traditional curator, who perceived him- or herself essentially as a scholar in the service of an institution of the public sphere. Condensed as this casual remark may have been, it nevertheless indicated that the managerial curator would conceive exhibitions on the model of the advertising campaign and seasonally determined product innovation.

Second, the quip suggested to me that expectations for and responses to certain contemporary art production exceeded even the most pessimistic predictions for the future of high culture by, for example, the situationists. The particular fusion (and confusion) of separate modes of experience that the curatorial quip performed proved that the social tendency that forces the work of art to function as a mere fetish of sign exchange-value had already been fully accepted as a commonplace.
Richter has articulated his explicit resistance to this type of historical grave-robbery, especially in the last six years, by recuperating historically inaccessible pictorial types such as the still-life-as-*memento mori*, to which his *Skulls* and *Candle* paintings refer. This recuperation, however, acts explicitly as a resistance to false immediacy and to the claim that the irreversible loss of these categories of painterly commemoration could be redeemed. What is convincing in Richter's *Skulls* and *Candle* paintings is their character as grotesques: they brilliantly perform the purely technical availability of these pictorial types while at the same time they publicly invalidate any actual experience once conveyed by this genre. But since the paintings *October 18, 1977* are as different from this mode of the grotesque as they are from the early photopaintings to which at first glance they seem to return, it seems all the more difficult to clarify their attitude toward the historical subject. Unlike most contemporary German painting, which simply ignores the fact that the prohibition of representation itself has become an irreversible historical reality that can only be ignored at the price of mythicizing painting, Richter's nonetheless insists on transcending that irreversible historical fact with the very means of painting.

But if painting's own recent history raises barriers to the accessibility of a language with which to represent historical and political fact, the historical field itself is riddled with instances of amnesia about specific events, making it clear that history's own accessibility to itself is at issue. "Polit-kitsch" painting is as unconcerned with this second issue as it is with the first, having settled into the comfort of a repetitively enacted, gratuitous ritual of engaging with history without even addressing the concrete instances of actual recent repression.

Richter's shift from the current fashion within German painting—the fashion for pointing to the history of fascism—to an attempt to recall the seemingly inaccessible moment of extra-parliamentary opposition and its terrorist consequences in the history of the Baader-Meinhof Group and the Red Army Faction thereby also implies a criticism of the irresponsible dabbling in the history of German fascism with the meagre means of generally incompetent painting. At the same time, it is also an attempt to reflect upon the actual power of contemporary repression and, through Richter's own pictorial means, to transform this power of repression into the question of its very representability.

The extent to which the Baader-Meinhof Group has in fact become the object of collective repression (or the object of internalized state censorship) is reflected in the fact that only rarely—as in the case of Joseph Beuys's spontaneous declamation "*Dürer, I will personally guide Baader and Meinhof through Documenta V*" (1972) and Alexander Kluge's cooperative film project *Germany in Autumn* (1977–78)—has an artistic project addressed this particular subject. The film *Introduction to Arnold Schönberg's Accompaniment to a Cinemaographic Scene* (1972), by Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet, was banned from German television because it was dedicated to the memory of Holger Meins, a young film director who had participated in the activities of the Baader-Meinhof Group.
and became one of the victims of the events at Stammheim Prison (events surrounding the deaths of the five members of the group, which were presented as a collective suicide, but were suspected of having been, instead, a state-ordered police assassination).

In order to recall the collective inability of West Germans to reflect upon the history of the most radical challenge to their postwar economic and political order, we should compare it to the way the Italian government succeeded in treating an incomparably larger, more efficiently organized anarchistic opposition movement at the same time. The astonishment of the German reader at this comparison (perhaps also that reader’s secret shudder at the contemplation of Italian liberality in the treatment of the enemies of the state) becomes apparent in a recently published essay by the German historian Arnulf Baring:

One consequence was the enormous movement of left-wing terrorism haunting Italy in the 1970s. . . . One almost spoke of an armed party. The number of arrests surpassed several thousands. State-of-emergency laws were introduced, and one of the most important politicians of Italy, Aldo Moro, was kidnapped and murdered. It is all the more remarkable to see to what extent the Italian state remained willing to communicate and negotiate: after only a few years the conflict that had approached civil war was successfully defused and finally resolved. According to Bolaffi it was the intervention of the Catholic church in particular that allowed for a reconciliation within a brief period of time. The sentences of those convicted were reduced, their living conditions in the prisons were improved, and many of them were granted early release.

In comparison it seems that throughout the 1970s the German state was unable to afford such a degree of tolerance. Even at the end of the 1980s its citizens seem to have difficulty developing even the mnemonic basis for reconciliation. The intended effect of the elimination of this group, however, was clearly accomplished: not only has their history become the object of collective repression, but, at the same time, the project of an extra-parliamentary opposition and the active presence of a radical, interventionist critique of the social order (euphemistically called the society of consumption) has been eradicated.

Richter’s October 18, 1977 attempts to initiate a reflective commemoration of these individuals, whose supposed crimes remained to a large degree unproven (despite years of pretrial investigation, which never even resulted in an indictment), as was that crime (never even investigated) whose victims they became. These paintings contradict the present historical moment, which prohibits reflection on the activities of one of the most important left-wing journalists and pacifists of postwar Germany, Ulrike Meinhof, a young literary historian, Gudrun Ensslin, and a young film director, Holger Meins.
Arrest (2). *1988.*
In their engagement with a historical subject the new paintings are no more desperate than are Richter's abstract paintings in their engagement with the very possibility of painting. Since, therefore, both series are focused on the crisis of contemporary painting, that crisis is reflected upon along its various axes: production no less than reception. In his explicit refusal to break the group of paintings *October 18, 1977* into individual objects or to have them enter into the usual channels of market distribution, Richter contests, even if in a singular construction of an exceptional situation, the current modes of consumption as the exclusive form of responding to artistic practice.