

Fragmenting Reality: Gerhard Richter's All-Seeing *Panorama* at Neue Nationalgalerie

Article by *Cara Cotner*



Gerhard Richter, *Abstraktes Bild* (Catalogue Raisonné: 858-3), 1999, oil on alu dibond, 50 cm x 72 cm.

Berlin currently plays host to an unprecedented trio of Gerhard Richter exhibitions. *Gerhard Richter: Panorama* is a comprehensive retrospective at Neue Nationalgalerie, and the accompanying *Editions 1965-2011* at me Collectors Room is a collection of Richter's graphic prints, photographic editions and artist's books. The Alte Nationalgalerie presents Richter's *October 18, 1977* series of 15 paintings depicting the lives and suspected prison suicides of the Baader-Meinhof Group.

Of these, *Panorama* has been cast front and center; it is not just a retrospective -it is a massive international art event. Over the past 30 years, Gerhard Richter has ascended to the highest ranks in the art industry, his popularity only increasing by the year. His work regularly sells for millions of euros, but that is often meaningless. It is the remarkable scope and sustained quality of his work that makes Richter the most successful contemporary German artist.

Coinciding with Richter's 80th birthday, *Panorama* navigates the span of his fifty-year career. Richter's work is marked by a simultaneous focus on disparate pictorial concerns and employs distinct techniques in the service of investigating the visual image. Occupying the Neue Nationalgalerie's upper floor, *Panorama* features 130 paintings and five sculptures largely constructed of glass and steel. The exhibition is presented chronologically (with a couple exceptions), and consequently it is possible to trace the development of many of Richter's ideas and methods.

The genesis of one of Richter's most recognized techniques, the blur, is already visible in the first images in the collection. It's notable just how present many of his ideas were from the start, concepts that would form the basis of decades' worth of artistic inquiry. In Richter's earliest works, the technique was noticeably less refined, but it developed very quickly. An early example, *Tote* (1963), is a grey scale painting after a newspaper photograph that shows the dead body of Ulrike Meinhof on the ground. An atmospheric haze is achieved by smudging the paint and functions as a way to conceal certain pictorial elements from the viewer. Later Richter's blur would often serve a similar purpose.

Yet there is no singular function for Richter's famous blur. At times the blur supports the illusion of movement in the image, and at other times it references the visual effects of news reports or documentary photographs. Often the blur serves to obfuscate, paradoxically rendering the impact of the image sharper and clearer. And the blur suggests the constant flux of perception, the gulf between memory and the photographic record, and the impossibility of achieving an absolute truth in a singular visual image.

Richter's paintings have a unique and involved relationship with photography. Utilizing a method he calls photo-painting, he often projected photographic images onto his canvases, using them as a foundation for his paintings. Richter would then manipulate the photographic image when translating it onto canvas. Whether dealing with actual historical events such as World War II and the Baader-Meinhof deaths or working from personal family snapshots, the process is the same in his photo-paintings.

In a 1972 interview with Rolf Schön, Richter stated that "the photograph reproduces objects in a different way from the painted picture, because the camera does not apprehend objects: it sees them." In 1965 Richter, Sigmar Polke, and Konrad Fischer-Lueg created an exhibition called *Capital Realism*, from whence the movement Capitalist Realism derived its name. Capitalist Realism dealt with many of the same ideas as Pop Art, and central to what interested Richter about Pop was how an advanced media culture supplanted individual and authentic memories with public ones.

Richter's postmodern hesitation to produce a singular, grand narrative is partly responsible for his seeking refuge in wildly different methods of representation, often working on abstracts, photo-paintings, sculptures or color chart paintings at the same time. In an interview with Rolf-Gunter Dienst in 1970, Richter was asked how he viewed his role as a painter. Richter stated "I prefer to steer clear of anything aesthetic, so as not to set obstacles in my own way and not to have the problem of people saying: 'Ah, yes, that's how he sees the world, that's his interpretation.' "



Gerhard Richter, *Kerze* (Catalogue Raisonné: 511-3), 1982, oil on canvas, 100 cm x 100 cm.

Works like *Tote* also reveal an early fascination with death as subject matter, which features as a recurrent theme in Richter's subsequent work. He would later paint series of people who met extremely violent ends, such as his four works in 1975 detailing the mauling of a tourist by lions in Spain or his *October 18, 1977* (1988) Baader-Meinhof series. His famous works featuring haunting and delicate *memento mori* images of lit candles and skulls are also a part of *Panorama*.

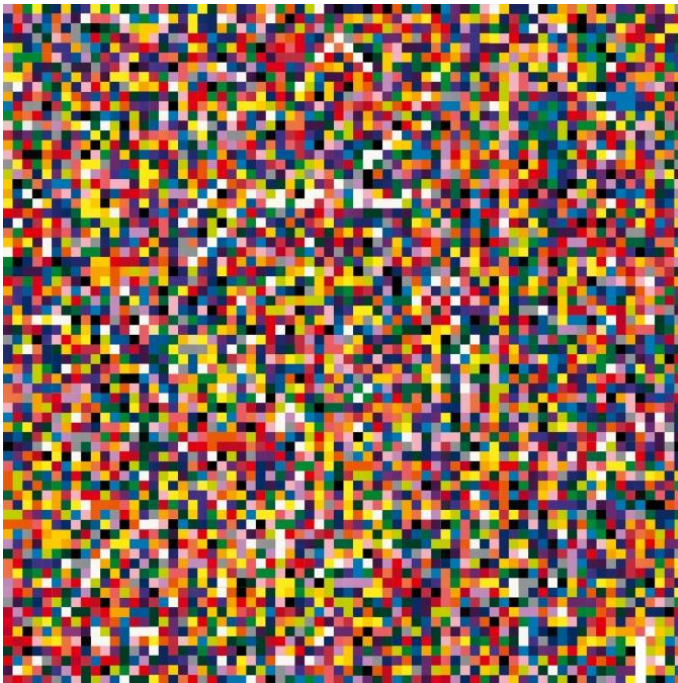
The theme of death also relates to death in the momentary image and the increasing blurring of truth that comes with death, loss, and the passage of time. As Benjamin Buchloh stated in his essay on Richter's *Atlas* project, "what photographs by their sheer accumulation attempt to banish is the collection of death, which is part and parcel of every memory image." And, in painting from photographs, Richter highlights the void of understanding, giving his paintings a ghost-like lingering quality that is different from a photograph, and often more compelling.

One of the high points of *Panorama* is the display of many of Richter's grey monochromes. By severely limiting his color palette, Richter launches into deep explorations of texture, shape and pictorial space. One abstract in particular, *Untitled (Stroke)* (1968) reveals a total mastery of line and shade. In 1968 his attention fittingly turned toward Paris. From an aerial view, his *Townscape Paris* reduced the tumult of the Paris streets to blocks and dabs of shades of grey.

Richter's excellent forays into the world of sculpture again remind us of the tension between the idea of an objective reality and subjective experience. One sculpture, *Spiegel* (1981), is just that – a large, perfectly polished mirror that opens the exhibition and serves as a metaphor for the constant process of seeing and being seen. The most successful sculpture is *11 Panes* (2004). It plays with the blurred mirror-like effect created by the positioning of 11 large plates of glass,

and it is quite fun to look at. Such sculptures are set off nicely by Neue Nationalgalerie's expansive exhibition space.

Richter's celebrated large-scale abstracts make for impressive viewing in person, with the exception of *Abstract Painting* [620] (1987), a jarring 1980s-neon color explosion that seems unfocused. His *Abstract Painting* [726] (1990) marks the height of this style, with its layers of bold hues blurred with a squeegee and sections of dried paint stripped away and added to again. The two front rooms feature more recent works from 1999-2009, chronicling his experiments with the natural formations of enamel and acrylic on the back of glass. Finally, the entire exhibition is encircled by *4900 Colors* (2007), consisting of 196 panels of 25 enamel color squares each chosen randomly by a computer program.



Gerhard Richter, *4900 Farben* (Catalogue Raisonné: 901), 2007, lacquer on alu dibond, 680 cm x 680 cm.

Richter's refusal to commit to one style creates a pleasingly schizophrenic body of work that engages the viewer on many levels. The challenge in presenting work from such a long and successful career is that any retrospective will necessarily be incomplete – it is simply not possible to show all of Richter's essential images, though *Panorama* does make a respectable effort. In addition to a brilliant command of his materials, Richter has a talent for making historical events personal, and manages to make the personal monumental. He calls our attention to the way we perceive the world around us while criticizing the notion of an absolute reality. There are few slight missteps, and it is a testament to the uncommon quality of his work and depth of his ideas that there is so much of interest to be found in *Panorama*.

CARA COTNER
