

GERHARD RICHTER'S PAINTINGS OF TERRORISTS:
THE ARTIST CONFRONTS HISTORY

A THESIS

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BY

GAIL W. COPE

DENTON, TEXAS

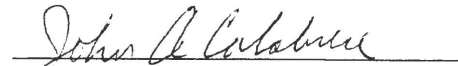
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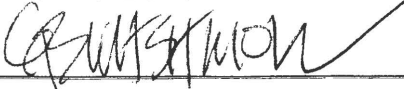
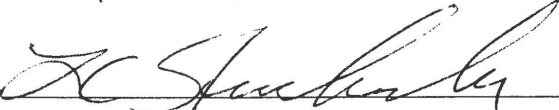
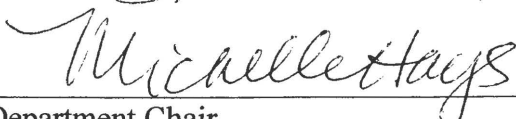
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To the Dean of the Graduate School:

I am submitting herewith a thesis written by Gail W. Cope entitled "Gerhard Richter's Paintings of Terrorists: The Artist Confronts History." I have examined the thesis for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts with a major in Art History.


Dr. John Calabrese, Major Professor

We have read this thesis and recommend its acceptance:




Department Chair

Accepted:


Interim Dean of the Graduate School

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DEDICATION

For my friends in Germany, Hermann and Sigi Geiser, and their daughter Isabel G. Bauer, thank you for all your support.

ABSTRACT

GAIL W. COPE

GERHARD RICHTER'S PAINTINGS OF TERRORISTS:

ARTIST CONFRONTS HISTORY

May 2013

This thesis addresses these questions: Why did Gerhard Richter choose to paint terrorism, a complex, political, and polarizing theme? How does he convey such a subject, deal with the controversy generated, get the paintings exhibited, and find a permanent home for them? Acclaimed artist Gerhard Richter painted fifteen scenes of the violent Baader-Meinhof Gang that terrorized West Germany from 1968 to 1977. He named his amorphous views of the terrorists and their deaths simply, *October 18, 1977*, the date the gang leaders died in their prison cells. Research included visits to the German gallery that first exhibited the paintings, the MOMA in New York City, which owns them, and the Tate Modern in London. The author had access to original material in museum archives. Richter was drawn to the theme in part from his experiences growing up in Nazi Germany and may have been seeking validation as a painter of history.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Statement of the Problem

This study examined the ways contemporary German artist Gerhard Richter painted the controversial theme of domestic terrorism. He painted a series, or cycle, of fifteen paintings, titled *October 18, 1977*. The paintings portray in his unique way the violent Baader-Meinhof Gang, their actions, the government's response, and their demise.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to look at the ways a contemporary artist dealt with a timely and controversial theme; the choices he made in limiting the subject matter; and the difficulties he faced in exhibiting and finding a permanent home for such a large and controversial grouping. The artist insisted that the fifteen could only be shown together.

Significance of the Problem

For Richter to choose to paint scenes related to domestic terrorism was both artistically problematic and publically controversial, especially when he focused on the death scenes of the terrorists. This work even raises the question of whether terrorism is a legitimate artistic issue. Terrorism is a dominant theme in today's world. How should the artist respond to that reality? How can it be expressed artistically? There are no easy

answers. His background and experiences provide some insight into his choices, but we are left with intriguing questions, most especially “why?”

Review of the Related Literature

The Baader-Meinhof Gang was a small group of middle class, well-educated young people who objected to what they saw as the Nazification of the West German government in the 1960s, with former Nazis in cabinet and upper level administrative posts. They also objected to the government’s indirect support of the Vietnam War. They were part of the young, rebellious zeitgeist of the 1960s and 1970s, a nearly global youth movement for change and revolution. When the group’s protests and demonstrations failed to get results, they escalated to acts of outright terrorism, committing bombings, robberies, kidnappings, and, finally, murder. The leaders were eventually captured and sent to prison. One of the key leaders, for whom the group was named, Ulrike Meinhof, killed herself in her prison cell in 1976, a year before the other leaders did the same.

The terrorists had made connections with the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO). When Palestinian hijackers took over a Lufthansa plane, which landed in Mogadishu, they demanded that the remaining gang leaders be released. On the night of Oct. 18, 1977, German special forces recaptured the plane, killed the hijackers, and released the hostages. That same night the Baader-Meinhof Gang members were found dead in their cells, allegedly victims of suicide. Their supporters and others questioned this official version of their deaths, and the truth has never been settled to their

satisfaction. Richter chose to paint scenes from the cells, dead members of the group, confrontations with police during their capture, and, the largest painting of the group, the funeral of the dead gang leaders. By then, they were seen as martyrs by many people. Thousands attended their funeral. Stefan Aust, a friend of Meinhof's before she joined the gang, offers the most comprehensive history of their era of terrorism in his book *The Baader Meinhof Complex*.

In reviewing the literature related to Richter and his *October 18, 1977* cycle, it was important to look at multiple sources, not just the scholarly reviews and books about him, and published retrospectives of his career. Of particular importance are the sources Richter used for his paintings—articles about the terrorists and the government actions to stop them and, above all, the photographs in newspapers and magazines that Richter collected. The photographs were the basis for his paintings.

Richter is a complex personality who rarely gives interviews, and certainly does not respond in a straight-forward manner to questions. In order to analyze why he chose the theme, and the choices he made to complete the cycle of paintings, it is important to study his biography and to read as much as possible of his writings and lectures. A compendium of all Richter's writings, interviews, lectures, and gallery talks was published in 2008 in Germany (Elger and Obrist). This proved very helpful in understanding Richter and his thought processes related to the Baader-Meinhof paintings.

Another resource was a reproduction of the original catalog that accompanied the first exhibition of *October 18, 1977* at the Galerie Haus Esters in Krefeld in 1989. The

catalog included several interviews with Richter by prominent art historians at the time, such as Jan Thorn-Prikker and Benjamin Buchloh. To have these interviews bound with reproductions of the cycle and photographs of the exhibition space made the reactions of the time more immediate and comprehensible.

I visited the archives of Galerie Haus Esters in Krefeld in January 2009 to learn more about how the paintings were received by both the local and so-called boulevard press and in scholarly reviews that appeared in Krefeld and Frankfurt. The curator, Dr. Sabine Roeder, allowed me total access to the files, which were extensive and could be copied. The gallery is located in one of a pair of Mies van der Rohe houses. I took pictures of the outside and inside of the Galerie Haus Esters to include with the thesis. I hoped to find employees who would remember the first exhibition but could not. I am fluent in German, so was able to read the catalog of the exhibit and books published only in German. When I quote these sources, the translations are my own.

Today, Richter's cycle resides in the Museum of Modern Art in New York City, which purchased the paintings in 1995. Even that purchase was controversial. In January 2008 Mathias Herold, a curator at MOMA, showed me the files relating to *October 18, 1977*. I had access to the museum's correspondence with the artist, files related to the decision to buy the paintings, the negotiations and financing, and the artist's concerns. Richter included a personal scrapbook with the paintings, but it was missing from the files. As far as I can determine, the scrapbook has not been found. The comprehensive work by Robert Storr, *Gerhard Richter: Forty Years of Painting*, which accompanied the

MOMA retrospective of Richter's works in 2002, gives an insightful look at the artist, his works, and his philosophy. Storr was a curator at MOMA at the time and organized the exhibit.

Another work by Storr, *Gerhard Richter: Doubt and Belief in Painting*, goes more to the heart of Richter's philosophy and artistic struggles. Storr states that Richter takes a neutral stance in the cycle *October 18, 1977*:

Richter chose the subject matter to point out the tragic dimension of the twentieth century in which the world saw things ideologically in black and white. Richter's signature gray—and in these pictures the most somber and chilling of grays—is the emblem of an anguished uncertainty about historical truth as well as of a principled refusal to take sides in a contest of destructive absolutes. (6)

Resources relating to the Baader-Meinhof gang were interesting for historical background but not relevant to the analysis of Richter's choices of theme and techniques. The book and movie released in the last few years (both titled the *Baader Meinhof Complex*), as well as numerous articles from the most active time of the group, to the articles discussing the release of the remaining jailed members of the Baader-Meinhof Gang in 2009 and 2010, can certainly bring up other questions for study, but proved to be not as helpful for the purposes of this thesis.

Methodology

1. A search was made for material written about Richter's cycle of paintings *October 18, 1977*, about his life and philosophy, and about the historical events of the Baader-Meinhof Gang.

2. Many monographs, art journals, books, dissertations, and Richter's own writings and lectures were only available in the archives of MOMA and Kunstmuseum Krefeld (which includes the Galerie Haus Esters).
3. I made personal, on-site visits to institutions where Richter's cycle was shown:
 - A. The archives of MOMA, which owns the paintings, where I also interviewed the curator Mathias Herold;
 - B. The archives of the Kunstmuseum in Krefeld, Germany, where the cycle was first exhibited, in order to study the original reactions (in German) by the press and critics;
 - C. The gallery in Krefeld where the first exhibition was held, in order to understand the situation of the exhibition and the placement of the works.
4. The fifteen paintings were analyzed in order to point out specific formal and content problems and how Richter solved them. The most basic choices were which subjects to paint. Should he just paint the Baader-Meinhof leaders or should their victims also be shown? Should information on the group and its activities be included with the exhibition, especially when it was not being shown in Germany? How much information would be needed to help the audience understand what was being depicted? How could the paintings be shown without causing protests and what would their impact be on the

children and family members of the terrorists or the families of their victims?

(Color illustrations of the paintings are included).

5. An extensive bibliography is included.

Limitations

1. This study concentrated only on Richter's artistic representation of German terrorism by the Baader-Meinhof Gang.
2. This study was limited to the paintings of Gerhard Richter. Other artists will be included only as their work related appropriately to the topic.

Definition of Terms

All terms used in this thesis are either in common usage, or, as in the discussion of German terrorism, were defined within the text itself. The title of the work, *October 18, 1977*, is used in the spelling and format that is used by the Metropolitan Museum of Modern Art. In German, it is expressed as *18. Oktober 1977*. It sometimes appears as *18 October 1977*.

CHAPTER II

THE BAADER-MEINHOF GANG :

THEIR PLACE IN GERMAN HISTORY

Protest escalated to violence when the infamous Baader-Meinhof Gang terrorized West Germany from 1968 to 1977. The government response also escalated, leading to the arrests and imprisonment of the leaders and many gang members. Contemporary German artist Gerhard Richter was inexorably drawn to the story of the terrorists, their motives, and demise. He collected photographs and studied their history for several years, and painted canvas after canvas. Finally, ten years after their suicides—or were they executions?—he selected fifteen paintings and mounted a public exhibition. The subject matter, style of the paintings, even his insistence that the cycle only be shown as a complete work and without written explanations, remain controversial to this day. At the heart of the matter is the artist's response to violence and terror. A little history is in order.

The six people who formed the core cadre of Germany's first domestic terrorists were young intellectuals who came from various backgrounds. They shared a deep distrust of their government. They believed it was being taken over by former Nazis and fascists who were subverting the constitution of the still-new democracy. These young people were part of a new generation of Germans who were determined not to sit

passively by as they believed their parents had done during the Hitler regime. Like many young people coming to political awareness in the decade of the 1960s, they had intense reactions to what they viewed as injustices and inequalities. They became activists, protesting government power, unfairness, and the Vietnam War. They were part of the drama and turmoil of the decade that was playing out in the United States and across the globe. The movement began as student demonstrations and protests, fed by Marxist ideals. The story of the Baader-Meinhof Gang is one of disaffected, alienated, and ultimately destructive young people who either became part of a terrorist group or were manipulated by them. The leaders became notorious cult figures, supported and favored by some and hated by others. It is the story of protest evolving into terrorism.

Andreas Baader and his girlfriend Gudrun Ensslin took the revolution to new levels of violence when they took over leadership. Born on May 6, 1943 in Munich, during World War II, Baader was the son of Dr. Berndt Phillipp Baader, who was a historian and archivist. Dr. Baader was taken prisoner by the Russians in 1945 while he was in the army, reported missing, but the family never knew when or where he died. Baader's mother, Anneliese, never remarried and took her son to live with her own mother and sister. Andreas was spoiled by the three women. He was intelligent, but only worked at something when he was interested in it, and could be violent if thwarted. His mother could not control him, and he would never obey orders. He had strong opinions and would protest rules by not bathing, refusing food, not celebrating his birthday, and even trying to persuade his mother not to celebrate Christmas. Today he would be called

“oppositionally defiant” or, simply, a troubled youth. He would give away his possessions generously, but he would also steal. He was frequently in fights, but sometimes the fights were to protect others. By the time he was twenty, Baader had a criminal record for his frequent fighting, bike thefts and stolen cars, as well as run-ins with the police. He moved to West Berlin to avoid military service. He moved into a large apartment with two friends who were painters and took up a Bohemian lifestyle. He joined up with the student protest movement but he missed the first protests that turned violent, the ones against the Shah of Iran’s visit, because he was in jail for motorbike theft. Then in the summer of 1967 he turned up at the apartment of Gudrun Ensslin.

Ensslin, the fourth child of seven in the family of a protestant pastor, was active in the church, taking leadership roles in the Protestant Girls’ Club and the Bible study group. She was sent on an exchange to Pennsylvania where she stayed with a Methodist community. She was critical of the shallowness of the American church, because the church did not embrace political and social action. She attended Tübingen University where she studied German and English language and literature, as well as educational theory. She moved on to the Free University in Berlin, and she became involved in the student protests against the visit of the Shah of Iran. Baader did not participate in these demonstrations and protests because he was incarcerated. He appears in the city some time later and meets Ensslin in her apartment at a discussion of future activities that could be undertaken by the student protest movement. It was from these student activists that the nucleus of the future Baader/Meinhof Gang was formed.

In time, Ensslin and Baader took over leadership of the group, making all decisions without much discussion with the other members. Ironically, they ruled the gang with dictatorial tactics much like those they accused the government of. They used intimidation and guilt to coerce the gang into more and more dangerous and violent acts. To oppose their decisions meant to oppose the ideals of their movement. Those who did not comply were forced out or, as the group's violence escalated, were murdered. One member, Astrid Proll, remembered, "Of course people were afraid—afraid of being arrested, or they didn't feel happy under group pressure—but that kind of thing was never discussed. We were afraid of discussion; it seemed like treachery. And we tried fending off danger by involving ourselves in it more and more" (Aust 99).

The dissidents saw themselves as the conscience of their country and to do that they had to get attention for their beliefs and causes. Aust described them as knowingly creating their image. He wrote, "They constructed an image of themselves as icons, and they did indeed become icons in all the severity and brutality with which they turned on those whom they considered their adversaries, those who were not involved, their own comrades, and in the end themselves" (xi).

As with most of the other terrorist groups that have formed from either political or religious passions, their actions were both murderous and suicidal. They expected to become immortal by dying as martyrs, a wish that has parallels with more recent terrorists. Aust explains:

Terrorists regard themselves as martyrs. They hope that with the example they set, their experimenting on a living subject, they will go down in history, or at least enter Paradise with its seventy virgins. To that extent the Attas and the Baaders of this world have much in common—each in his own time, but always embedded in a revolutionary mainstream, whether socialist or, as at present, an Islamist nature. Both Mohammed Atta and Andreas Baader came very close to their aim of gaining immortality through their deaths. (xii)

Mohammed Atta, of course, was one of the masterminds of the attacks on Sept. 11, 2001 which took down the Twin Towers in New York City. Just as Sept. 11 has a place in the consciousness of Americans, the acts by the Baader-Meinhof Gang are part of the history of Germany. Aust draws the historic references:

The history of the Red Army Faction or Baader/Meinhof Gang is part of the history of the Federal Republic of Germany. Above all, the “German Autumn” of 1977, which saw the abduction and later murder of Hanns Martin Schleyer, president of the German Employers’ Association, and the hijacking of the Lufthansa aircraft Landshut, ending in Mogadishu, was the greatest challenge yet to post-war German society. At least so far as their effects on internal German politics were concerned, these dramatic events are comparable with the significance for the USA of 11 September 2001. (xii)

The transition from protest to terrorism was abetted by philosophers and writers who advocated violent forms of resistance. “Indignation turned to protest, protest to resistance, resistance to violence and violence to outright terrorism” (Aust, xiii). When street-corner protestors handed out leaflets calling for the firebombing of department stores, it was only a matter of time until someone carried out such an act. It is no surprise that Ensslin and Baader were the ones to do it, with two accomplices. They set fires in two major department stores in Frankfurt. Ensslin’s father, the pastor, described his

daughter's actions as a quasi-religious experience, and her family felt that it had brought honor to them, not shame. The four arsonists were quickly captured, put on trial, and sentenced to seven years in prison. This is when Ulrike Meinhof entered the picture.

During the trial itself, Ulrike Meinhof, as columnist for *konkret*, visited the defendant Gudrun Ensslin in the remand prison. She wanted to write an article for *konkret* and was deeply impressed by the Swabian pastor's daughter, who had so much in common with herself, her ways of thought, her own commitment. But Gudrun Ensslin had not just talked about it; she had done something. (Aust 39)

Meinhof was an accomplished journalist and editor of the popular *konkret*, a left-wing student newspaper. She had drifted to the radical fringe of the student movement. Now, she became friends with Ensslin, moving her one more step toward the abyss of violence to come. Meinhof's parents died when she was quite young and she was raised by an aunt who was a dedicated Socialist. Meinhof's husband published *konkret* and they had twin daughters. She lived a comfortable middle class lifestyle. She is a more complex personality to understand because she gave up both career and family when she joined the gang.

Ensslin and Baader served fourteen months in prison for the firebombing when they were released awaiting an appeal. When the appeal was denied a few months later, they went underground. Baader was caught and returned to prison to serve his sentence. Ensslin and some of the others came up with a scheme to get him out which relied on Meinhof's presence and status as a journalist. She was coaxed to use her press credentials to get an interview with Baader, to take place in a library near the prison, and

the officials agreed. The two of them escaped through a window, helped by other gang members. That's when the press dubbed them the Baader-Meinhof Gang, even though it was Baader and Ensslin who were the top leaders. Meinhof was now fully engaged in the group. Over the next two years they were on the run, staging bank robberies and bombings. During this time Meinhof produced the gang's manifesto, *The Urban Guerilla Concept*, which included the first use of the name Red Army Faction, RAF, the name the gang preferred. Meinhof gave the RAF the emblem of a German Heckler& Koch machine gun, not the Russian Kalashnikov that was adopted by other international terrorists. (Aust, 107)

While on the run, they slipped out of the country and went to Jordan, where they trained in Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) camps. Meinhof even left her twin girls in one of the camps, to be raised as terrorists. Aust rescued them and returned them to their father. As the rebels trained in weapons, bomb building, and urban guerilla tactics, they were also connecting with people such as Palestinian leaders Yasser Arafat and Abu Hamid, becoming part of a larger terrorist movement.

During this time, two other people joined the gang, members who would be among those later arrested and imprisoned. Holger Meins, a student at the Berlin Film Academy, was quiet and shy and inclined to depression, seen around the academy carrying books by Chairman Mao. He made films in support of the student protest movement, including a documentary dealing with the visit to Germany by the Shah of Iran's in 1967. This visit had provoked the first protest demonstration in which a student

was killed. Meins also made a short documentary about Molotov cocktails including how to make them and use them to best advantage. When Baader escaped, police searched his apartment, thinking he may have been involved. When Meins tried to phone a lawyer, a police officer put a pistol to his forehead. This action pushed Meins to join up with the gang. He helped finance the group by robbing banks. He also used his contacts in the film scene to find prop makers who made weapons for the group thinking that they were props for the movies Meins was making.

Jan-Carl Raspe had been involved in the student protests and a cofounder for another protest group, Commune 2. He had been radicalized by the death of the student, Benno Ohnesorg, during the Shah's visit. He left the commune after getting his degree in sociology and moved into an apartment with his girlfriend Marianne. Marianne was a friend of Meinhof's, and when the RAF group returned from their training in Jordan, Raspe's apartment became one of their safe houses. By the autumn of 1970 both Raspe and Marianne were not only providing shelter to the group, they were participating in the operations. Raspe had an interest in chemistry and was familiar with the tools. He became the bomb and weapons maker. In prison he was the one to rig up the communications system for the group, and contrived a way to hide the modifications of the radios and record players to withstand the prison X-Ray machines.

Once the members of the Baader-Meinhof gang went underground, they had to obtain money in order to carry out their missions and to survive. They carried out a series of not very well planned bank robberies, and stole automobiles. They continued with

their plans for setting off bombs in U.S. bases, and other political actions. Most of their time was spent in avoiding the police. The government gradually tightened the manhunt and built up huge resources to hunt them down. It was only a matter of time before they all were arrested. The country had grown weary of the bombings, the robberies, the killings, the shoot-outs with police. They'd had enough of street violence.

The trials of Meinhof, Baader, Ensslin, and their cohorts were the longest and most expensive in German history. A special courthouse with extra security was built for the occasion—and any future trials of political prisoners. Germany had become more of what they had fought against: the loose confederacy of individual state police units had been eclipsed by a national FBI-like force. There was now a crack terrorist-fighting bureaucracy. And a special high-security unit was built within the Stammheim prison to house terrorists. Ensslin, Meinhof, Baader, Meins, and Raspe would be the first occupants.

But the gang was not finished. Their activities in prison only heightened the mythology that grew around them. Aust writes, “The Red Army Faction became its own subject. It had its own high-security wing in Stuttgart, Stammheim Prison, and next to it a specially erected courthouse. Stammheim became, in a way, the capital city of the RAF. The group was born again, and acting as midwives were the Federal Prosecutor’s Office, the law courts, the politicians and the public of the Federal Republic” (xvii).

As the state went forward with preparations for the trials, the prisoners were kept isolated from each other for a year. This did not stop them from communicating, mostly

through their attorneys. Meinhof's imprisonment was particularly severe in its isolation, which was extremely detrimental to someone prone to depression, as she was. They exploited the prison conditions in public statements made through the still active gang members. Aust described how they became the "victims:"

The perpetrators of terrorist acts now took on the role of victims. In a post-war German society stricken with guilt, that lent them a position which they and their helpers outside prison exploited to the full. At last they could play the part of martyrs. They put on a virtuoso performance allowing them to feature as victims persecuted and tortured by an unconstitutional state. And the machinery of state readily, and stupidly, went along with them. (xvii)

It was in the role of victim of the state that the Bader-Meinhof Gang became the most affective. They succeeded in a far greater way in capturing the attention of the public at large to their ideas by capitalizing on the mistakes of the prosecution and the government officials in charge of their supervision. By using hunger strikes and alerting the media to their situation, the Baader-Meinhof leaders forced the prison officials to allow them free time together. Once they were spending time in open areas together, they planned new actions for the outside members to carry out. The group members could and did take every advantage of the tools they had, which meant manipulating the media, the guards, the state security officials, their lawyers, and even their own families.

They used these tactics to gain special privileges: They had individual cells with some privacy. They were each allowed four subscriptions to newspapers or magazines. They could and did order any book, even on bomb making, and making a phone system from radios. They used that information to rig a phone system to talk to each other, even

though they were in separate sections of the prison. They had unlimited contact with lawyers, who were their co-conspirators. Guards were told not to listen to their conversations even to the point of being required to be eighteen feet away. The prisoners developed a code system to pass on information to their followers and to the new leaders of the group, who were trying to free them. Their defense and freedom became the foremost concern of the new Baader-Meinhof leaders. They carried on with bank robberies and kidnappings, making for sensational press headlines, keeping the group alive in the public's minds.

Meinhof was allowed visits with her daughters until shortly before her death, when she refused to see them. She took her own life a year before the others did. At 7:34 on May 8, 1976, a Sunday, two prison officers unlocked Cell 719. Meinhof was hanging from the grating over the window of her cell with her face turned to the door. The prison doctor, Dr. Helmut Henck was at the cell in only six minutes. He ascertained that "the body was already completely cold", and saw "numerous liver mortis marks" on the dead woman's arms (Aust 258). The corpse was not taken down from the window grating until 10:30. More than a dozen police officers had been collecting clues and photographing every inch of the cell and its contents.

The officers conducting the inquiry reconstructed the way Ulrike Meinhof must have died using the blue and white prison towels ripped into strips, knotted together, and twisted into a rope. Meinhof tied the rope around her neck, climbed on a stool, and put the other end of the rope through the close mesh over the window grating and jumped.

Meinhof left no farewell note, but she had written months before in the margin of a paper on strategy, “suicide is the last act of rebellion” (Aust 258).

The reorganized gang struck back at the government in April 1977. The Federal Attorney General, Siegfried Buback, was gunned down in Karlsruhe, and in July a gang of mostly young women shot the banker Jurgen Ponto in the hallway of his own home in Frankfurt. A hit list of sixty prominent German businessmen and government officials was targeted for assassination or kidnapping. The media uproar was intense and the government was criticized for being too lenient toward the prisoners. It was alleged that they were planning attacks from their cells with the help of lawyers and friends (Carroll and Paul 55). A new group attacked several targets in twenty-four hours. The first was a car bomb at Ramstein, the base for the NATO air command and the U.S. Air Force. No one was killed, but fifteen were injured. In the second attack, they set fire to American cars at a base in Wiesbaden. They set fire in the headquarters of the Social Democratic Party of Chancellor Helmut Schmidt.

Finally, in the fall, they kidnapped Hanns Martin Schleyer, head of the Federation of German Industries, and held him for ransom. The main demand was that the government free the Baader-Meinhof prisoners. The kidnapping was one of the most shocking for the country because of its bloody and brutal precision with both the driver and body guard killed. Tension reached a higher level when a group of Palestinians, loosely associated with the RAF, hijacked a Lufthansa plane, which was flown to Mogadishu. They held the passengers hostage demanding the release of the RAF

prisoners. A German commando unit got into place to try to free the hostages. They were able to take the plane, killing three of the four terrorists and free all eighty-six passengers and crew.

Early on the morning of Oct. 18, 1977, guards on their morning rounds at the Stammheim high-security prison found the bodies of the Baader-Meinhof prisoners. Ensslin had committed suicide using a cable taken from a loudspeaker; Baader was found with a gunshot wound from a pistol that had been smuggled into him in a record player. Raspe also was found dying from a pistol shot to the head. An investigation of the incident left many unanswered questions and led many to wonder if their deaths had been a state execution and not a last defiant act. One day later, the police found Schleyer's body in the trunk of a car. He had been shot execution style. Schleyer was buried in a state funeral in Stuttgart. Two days later, the three terrorists were buried together in one grave in the same graveyard. Thousands of people attended, many wearing balaclavas to hide their identity. The protest movement to create a more progressive and open society in West Germany ended with both sides paying the ultimate price. The twin funerals also buried hopes for change.

The results for the Baader-Meinhof group may be less impressive than their staying power. They had created the trappings of the very omnipresent government that they were against, with intense use of surveillance and creating interconnected police forces with computerized data collection, massive fingerprint files, and a specialized prison for political prisoners.

The group had violated their principals by committing violence against civilians. They had grown arrogant and dismissive of the thoughts and opinions of anyone who did not agree with them. The Baader-Meinhof group had stopped functioning as a political conscience for Germany and functioned solely for its own benefit. The group realized that their own government was using them to get laws on the books which the public would never have allowed if not for the threats of terrorist acts. They also knew that they were being manipulated as a weapon in the Cold War between East and West Germany. Aust noted that Baader, Meinhof, and Ensslin became icons, saying the “quasi-religious character of their deranged crusade” lasting from 1967 until 1977 had made them immortal in the minds of many on the German left (xviii).

Even when they decided to commit suicide in their cells on Oct. 18, 1977, they thought of themselves as martyrs and icons. In fact, the group's significance and actions are still being debated as a new generation learns about their exploits through a new book, a movie, and the art of Germany's most prominent artist. They were right in one sense, they have not been forgotten.

CHAPTER III

THE ARTIST'S PERSONAL HISTORY :

HIS INTERSECTION WITH TERRORISM

Gerhard Richter was born in 1932 into Nazi Germany. He referred to himself as a young child as a “little Nazi,” signifying the normalcy of a repressive state for the young and innocent. After the fall of the Hitler regime, he came of age in communist East Germany. As a young man he escaped to West Germany in 1962, and he was there when the protests started and billowed into a long-lasting wave of violence. His life has to be understood in the context of his direct experiences with radicalism. Knowing this, we can understand why he was “distressed” and “haunted” (Elger 305) by the futility of the Baader-Meinhof Gang and felt compelled to paint them. The paintings must be considered in the context of the artist’s personal history.

Richter’s home life was not happy. His parents had a strained relationship, in part from their own differences and in part from the strains imposed by the economy and the ever more repressive state. His mother, Hildegard Schönfelder, was from an upper middle class Bavarian brewing family in Kulmbach. Her father had some talent as a concert pianist, but no talent for the family's brewing business, which he ran into bankruptcy. The family moved to Dresden and lived off their investments while her father pursued his

music as a career, which never amounted to much. Hildegard was trained as a bookseller, which suited her and her passion for literature. She also was a talented pianist. She was dissatisfied with her position in life, aspiring to a more elevated class. Gerhard said of his mother: "My mother had such an elitist way about her." And he also remembers that "to be a meaningful person, from her perspective, one had to be a writer or artist or intellectual"(Elger Richter: A Life in Painting, p. 4) Hildegard's brother Rudi had enlisted but was killed in the first year of the war. Hildegard's sister, Marianne, had been incarcerated in a mental hospital for patients with mental deficiencies. There she was sterilized, and then deliberately starved until she died. Gerhard painted portraits of both of them in 1965.

The artist's father, Horst Richter, studied in Dresden and became a teacher of mathematics and physics in a high school there after graduation. This position was not high enough in status to please his wife. Unfortunately he was one of the unemployed in the unrest of the 1920s and 1930s as the country's economy imploded. The financial strain added to the problems in their marriage. Horst finally moved the family to the small town of Reichenau, currently named Bogatynia in Poland, where he had found a teaching job. The town was small and had cement manufacturing, coal mining, and textiles, but certainly no cultural activities to compare to the large urban center of Dresden. Horst was religious and attended Protestant Evangelical services every week. He also had to join the National Socialist Party as all teachers were required to do, even though as Richter remembers it, his father had never believed its ideology. Drafted into

the military in 1939, Horst Richter was sent to the eastern front. He spent all of the war in the military and never saw his son during this crucial developmental time.

After Horst was sent to fight in the western part of Europe, he surrendered to the Allied forces. He was incarcerated as an American prisoner of war until his release in 1946. When he returned home he was as a virtual stranger to his family. Due to his membership in the National Socialist Party, Horst was no longer allowed to be a teacher, under the Russian occupation. He became a laborer in a textile mill in the even smaller town of Zittau where the family had moved in 1943. Richter's mother considered her husband intellectually inferior to her, and even hinted to her son that Horst was not his real father. In 2002 Richter confirmed through genetic testing that Horst was not his biological father. This helped explain his mother's behavior and his own emotional distance from the man he considered his father.

Richter has said he had few unpleasant memories of the war years. He was involved in the Hitler Youth Group, but felt free to miss meetings with a note from his mother claiming illness. He and his friends would pick up and try out weapons that they found in the woods around the village which had been abandoned by retreating soldiers. "But I did want to be a soldier," he said. "I was a real little Nazi. When the soldiers came through the village, I went up to them and wanted to join them. It's a question of upbringing of course" (Richter 197).

After completing elementary school, Richter entered the gymnasium where he failed every class, including drawing. He showed early talent in art, which pleased his

mother. He was even allowed to observe a muralist, Hans Lillig, working at a local elementary school, which may have influenced his later subject choices when he attended the Art Academy in Dresden. With his failing grades he was moved to a vocational school where he had to take classes in stenography, bookkeeping, and Russian. At night he took a painting class. After his graduation in 1948 he got a job in a shop for painting signs, where worked for half a year. His work was to prime and clean the used shop signs so they could be re-painted by other employees. He got bored and quit that job to go to work with the municipal theater as an assistant set painter. This job lasted five months until he was fired for refusing to re-paint the stairs or to do the drudge work of keeping the theater in repair. He made an application to the Dresden Art Academy but was not accepted, partly because he was considered too bourgeois for the socialist system. He was told to work in a state-run business and then reapply, because employees of such businesses were given preference for admission. He took a job as a painter at a state-run textile plant. This time when he reapplied to the academy he was accepted, but did not receive full scholarship. He economized by living with his great aunt, even though it was a long commute. His aunt also supported him with funds for art supplies and other school expenses.

Richter recalled his days at the Academy. Classes began at at eight o'clock, and lasted for eight hours. Besides art classes, the school had a strong academic curriculum, including art history, Russian, and the required study of Marxism. "Richter learned an enormous amount at the academy: the techniques of working in various media, the

precise observation required in life drawing, and lessons of composition, all of which, even then, he regarded with some skepticism. It was important to the instructors that their charges acquire skills in a broad spectrum of traditional painting genres—portrait, still life, and landscape” (Elger and Obrist 11).

Richter was a great reader. During his high school days and later during his apprenticeships he made great use of the library, reading authors who had been banned by the National Socialists. During the time at the Dresden Art Academy his reading choices were limited to those approved by the socialist government. The books on the history of western art ended with impressionism. The new government was subordinating art to political doctrine as a way to educate their citizens, and only art which represented the factory worker and the farmers as cultural heroes was acceptable. The students, though, clandestinely circulated art magazines from the west and Richter’s aunt, who lived in the west, sent him books and gallery catalogs that exposed him to more of the new art.

Richter experienced a little more freedom at the academy by taking a mural class taught by Heinz Lohmar who had been a communist before the war, and immigrated back to the Soviet controlled zone after the war. Painting murals gave Richter a little more artistic freedom and definitely more financial security. After four semesters in the mural painting department, Richter began his final thesis project, a mural for the German Hygiene Museum in Dresden, which he called the *Joys of life (Lebensfreude)*. "The mural appears to have been apolitical, without any ideological reference other than what might

be construed as the celebration of a joyful socialist system liberated from fascism" (Elger Richter A Life in Painting p. 17). The mural was good enough to earn his certificate as a mural painter and the museum asked Richter to paint another one, which he planned but never painted. Richter worked from 1956 until his defection in 1961 as a freelance muralist completing several works for a kindergarten, a school, and the regional government headquarters of the Socialist Unity Party in Dresden.

In spite of the Cold War and the various economic and political blockades in East Germany, Richter managed to go to the west to see new art. He went to Dokumenta 2, one of the major German art exhibitions held in Kassel in West Germany and managed trips to Hamburg, Munich, and Paris. During these trips he was exposed to Ernst Wilhelm Nay, a member of the Informel movement in Germany, and the American "action painter" Jackson Pollock. (Elger Richter A Life in Painting p. 28) explained the impact this had on Richter:

Informel canvases were produced through spontaneous brushwork and the application of paint by smearing, dribbling, or splashing. Such painting has much in common with the abstract expressionism practiced by Pollack. For Richter the term "Informel" also connotes a spirit of otherness and a commitment to alternative solutions to problems. In this sense, even after he moved on to figurative painting, Richter never stopped thinking of himself as an Informal artist. (28)

Richter was so impressed by Pollock's painting in particular, along with some works by Lucio Fontan, that he admitted later, "I might almost say that those paintings were the real reason I left the GDR (German Democratic Republic/ East Germany). I realized that

there was something wrong with my whole way of thinking" (Elger, Richter A Life in Painting p. 28). New artistic explorations like those in the west were not allowed in East Germany and Richter was becoming dissatisfied with his own work. Still, he had a stable, comfortable life with enough work and his own studio. Politically life was becoming more restricted. Leaving for West Germany was difficult and required sacrifice as well as planning. In March 1961 Richter traveled to Moscow and Leningrad taking more luggage than he needed. On the return trip he left the excess baggage at the train station in West Berlin before continuing on to Dresden. A friend drove him and his wife, Ema, to Berlin the following weekend. They were not suspected as defectors because they carried no suitcases. Richter had sold his car to get money for their new life and they also received money from West Germany's social welfare office as refugees. His wife's parents already lived in the west in Oldenburg, so the couple went to them for a while. Richter's own parents were never allowed to leave the German Democratic Republic to visit their son. His mother died in 1967 and his father in 1968.

Richter settled in Düsseldorf because it had become a major art center for the democratic West Germany. Richter flourished in this new environment where contemporary art was supported in galleries and exhibitions. Within three years his work was being shown in one of the top galleries, run by Alfred Schmela. Having a show in his gallery signified that you were someone important in the art scene.

Even though he already had a degree from a fine art school, and he was nearing thirty, Richter decided to enroll at the academy in Düsseldorf to find contacts and to work

on his new art. He applied for admission directly to a professor who was known to take anyone, and then begged to start before the official term. He was assigned a studio where he went every day at eight o'clock with his briefcase, and where he worked until night. He had created so many paintings that he filled the walls and ceilings of his studio before he was officially enrolled. He transferred later into the class of K. O. Götz, a member of the international artists' movement called CoBrA and later a founder of the Quadriga painters' group. Götz' class was full of young talent like Sigmar Polke, Konrad Lueg, and Manfred Kuttner. Richter needed the comradeship of other artists to discuss art, exhibit with, and compete with. At the academy he was exposed to even more new art from the U.S. and from Western Europe. He experimented with many of the trends in art, but after his first year in Düsseldorf, he threw all of the paintings on a bonfire.

Pop Art caught Richter's attention, especially Roy Lichtenstein's work based on photos. Richter had incorporated photographs from mass media before seeing Lichtenstein's work. His painting called *The Party* from 1962 may have been his first such painting at the academy. By the time of the student review in February 1963, Richter had developed his style with something new and special. He would alter the image from the photo and play with the texture of the canvas surface. "Still, the contact with Lichtenstein's work proved essential for Richter," Elger and Obrist wrote (A Life 46). "Lichtenstein confirmed something that he had himself been struggling to come to terms with: that it was a legitimate practice to reproduce media images in paint." The

work Richter produced in 1963 did not end up on the burn heap. Richter valued the work and it became part of the documented catalog of his official paintings.

By turning to photographs to create his work, Richter also had subject matter that helped him to deal with his own personal issues. "In reality, the subject matter of Richter's photo-paintings is intimately tied to his private interests," Elger wrote (*A Life* 125). "In the great stretch of work produced between 1962 and 1967, he not only matured as a painter, broadening his range and raising his intellectual horizon, he also worked through a considerable amount of personal history."

In his biography of Richter, Elger points out that the reserve that one observes with the artist came from his formative years under National Socialism followed by his attempt to develop as an artist in the repressive system of the GDR. Until recently Richter has resisted even the suggestion that his work has personal motivation (Elger 31).

Many of the first critics to explore Richter's photo-paintings took him at his word when he said he pursued "no objectives, no systems, no tendency . . . no time for specialized concern." Some still do. Such a reception was perfectly acceptable to Richter for years. In fact, he encouraged it with what Obrist calls his "energizing contradictions as both a painter and a writer". (Elger 124)

Richter claimed that he selected his source material in a random manner, showing indifference to the content. But later, in interviews with Benjamin Buchloh in 1986 and Doris von Drathen in 1992, Richter admitted to choosing personally significant images, and that his supposed indifference was a defense from appearing too sentimental.

His *Aunt Marianne* and *Mr. Heyde* (the Nazi doctor)—numbers 87 and 100, respectively in Richter's catalogue raisonné—would seem to be in direct dialogue. Taken together, they certainly deepen the historical dimension of Richter's family narrative. "Richter's painting of his aunt holding him as a toddler shows the subject in an idyllic style shortly before she was taken to the asylum in Großschweidnitz" (Elger 129-131) where she was murdered by the Nazi doctors who were working in the euthanasia program. Richter did not want the paintings to be seen as social commentary when he first showed the works. Elger also points out that Richter had problems with his male role models and finds evidence of this in paintings of his father and his uncle Rudi in 1965:

As a young artist, Richter was not about to reveal how troubling much of these materials were for him. Therefore he painted his subjects in a way that made it nearly impossible to reconstruct their personal context; in almost all of them the viewer's attention is drawn to the mass-media motif (photograph) while Richter works unnoticed through deeply felt private experiences. Nevertheless, he was grappling with the models of masculinity embodied by his uncle and his father, and the conflicting values they implied: to stand out and be counted was to risk annihilation like Rudi; to cower like Horst was to survive. To stand and smile? To crouch and hide? Both ways were cursed. In his notes from 1964-1965 Richter expressed the wish to disappear into the apolitical masses and not to distinguish himself. (Elger 140)

Even after Richter moved away from the photo portraits to more abstract work, the artist confronted memories of his childhood during the war years. Richter was living only seventy-five kilometers from Dresden when it was fire-bombed, where he could hear the bombing and see the fire lighting up the night. His maternal grandmother was living in the ruined city, and even six years later when Richter went to study at the art

academy in Dresden, the city was still in ruins. Richter's early abstracts from 1968 were a series of large townscapes that resemble views from a plane that would rain bombs. Again, he seemingly confronts memories, both the childish fascination and the absolute terror (Elger 165).

Richter and his friends, Isa Genzken and Benjamin Buchloh, often talked about the terror of the Baader-Meinhof gang, its causes and consequences. The two friends were sympathetic with the group's ideals, at least initially. Richter wanted to understand both the terrorists and his friend's perspectives. His experiences in Nazi Germany, living with war in the background, and then developing as an artist under the repressive Soviet controls made him distrust all ideology, yet he seemed to struggle with how best to deal with abuses of power. The prison suicides of the Baader-Meinhof leaders were just one more example of the futility of confrontation. "For Richter the events of October 18, 1977 became a metaphor for any ideology and its attendant inhumanity, which must lead, inevitably, to ruination," Elger wrote (305). Richter wonders why human beings have ideologies at all, and yet there is the sense of powerlessness. Painting the Baader-Meinhof group was a way to process for him the delusion of ideology. Richter collected articles and photographs of the group for several years, preserving them in his *Atlas*, the album of source materials that were his visual archive of families and ordinary life scenes as well as the most gruesome. He told Elger that he didn't know if the terrorists and their deaths could be paintable. He knew that some things could not be. "In my mid-twenties, I saw some concentration camp photographs that disturbed me very much. In my mid-

thirties I collected and took photographs and tried to paint them. I had to give up” (Elger 300).

Richter began his cycle *October 18, 1977* for personal reasons, even as he was disavowing any political statement. As a German with his specific life experiences he chose to face a controversial theme in order to clarify his thinking and that of the German audience. Death and suffering had to him always been a part of art history, and therefore were fit subject matter. As early as 1971 Richter and his fellow artist, Blinky Palermo, had staked out a counter-position to the Avant garde with its discussion of social responsibility and current trendiness. He showed a longing for the classical art in which he had been rigorously trained and a tendency to take refuge in art history. By the time he decided to take on the painting of the cycle on the Baader-Meinhof group, Richter's maturity and confidence allowed him to pursue the highest level of the art hierarchy which has always been history painting.

Richter's own problems with authority and the father figure were also resonant in the Baader-Meinhof group's actions and ideology. The post-war German mentality to stand up against the regime, unlike their parents and grandparents, was as much a part of Richter's world view as that of the terrorists. Richter was a skeptic who believed that revolution in itself was futile. Through the cycle he could express "his sense of powerlessness in the face of the events of the time" (Elger 304). Richter admitted in an interview with Sabine Schütz in 1999: “It is impossible for me to interpret the paintings. That is: in the first place they are too emotional; they are, if possible, an expression of a

speechless emotion. They are the almost forlorn attempt to give shape to feelings of compassion, grief and horror, as if the pictorial repetition of the events were a way of understanding those events, being able to live with them” (Elger 304).

We also have to look at the time period in which Richter started his Baader-Meinhof paintings. The German Democratic Republic, which helped sponsor the Baader-Meinhof Gang and gave them safe haven in order to undermine the Federal Republic of Germany, was on the brink of collapse, another symbol of failed ideology. Richter expressed his hatred for the communist regime: “From 1933 to 1989, that makes 56 years of uninterrupted dictatorship for the East Germans. Included within that, as necessary concomitants of dictatorship, were the catastrophes, the crimes, and the constant deprivations, offset by a vast effort of lies, slander, distortion and self-deception, an effort that could have been made only under the strictest control, under extreme duress—in a dictatorship, in fact” (Elger and Obrist, Writings 216). In the cycle, Richter was working out the unfinished business of the Baader-Meinhof group and that of post-war Germany, as well as what it meant to his generation to be German.

CHAPTER IV

THE ARTIST MAKES CHOICES :

FRAMEWORK FOR SCENES OF DEATH

The artist makes many choices as he creates his art. Richter's choices in painting *October 18, 1977* take on more meaning and greater difficulty because of the emotionally-charged subject matter. When he focused on the terrorists he was confronting a moment in history, as well as a personal one. Why did he choose to paint this subject at all? The gang's violence tore the country apart and their deaths were gruesome—not a likely artistic subject. How did Richter handle the typical artist's choices in order to make a statement about the RAF? History painting had once been the top tier of work a painter could do in his career, but with the advent of modern art, it was a lapsed genre. Was Richter attempting to reach that highest level of achievement?

The first choice Richter made was the theme of the paintings. Many people questioned his choice of topic and the timing. He collected photographs and studied the RAF for years, so painting something about them was a choice he considered for a long time. And when he released the paintings ten years after the terrorists' suicides, he provoked inevitable controversy. "Arguably no other work of twentieth-century art has been discussed so vehemently or provoked such ongoing controversy in Germany," Elger wrote (282). There were still unsettled issues, including whether the gang leaders took

their own lives as “a last act of revolutionary defiance or out of despair, or whether they were executed by agents of the state” (Storr, Forty 75). And their supporters still engaged in sporadic acts of violence into the 1990s.

Richter had made history paintings before when he painted the Allied war planes in action. He had also examined his family’s involvement with World War II and Germany's actions in his paintings *Uncle Rudi* and *Herr Heyde*. But there was no precedent, in his work or any other, for the RAF cycle. According to Storr, “Nothing in his oeuvre had fully anticipated *October 18, 1977*. Neither its topical nature nor its ambitious reappraisal of the reliability of photomechanical imagery in relation to the problems of representing what we know about the past or believe about its significance had any precedent” (Storr, *Gerhard Richter Forty Years of Painting* 76).

In an interview, Jan Thorn-Prikker asked Richter directly why he chose such a socially powerful subject. Richter replied, "It is the most natural thing in the world to focus on special events. It would be absurd if the things that affect us the most were taboo. Then we would just produce banalities" (Elger and Obrist 233). In another interview Richter was more forthcoming, saying, “The deaths of the terrorists and the related events both before and after stand for a horror that distressed me and has haunted me as unfinished business ever since, despite all my efforts to suppress it” (Elger and Obrist 305). This last quote reflects a deeper, personal response to the era of terror. Richter had only just escaped the repressive regime of East Germany in 1961. Having lived under Nazism and communism, he was not sympathetic to the complaints or tactics

of the RAF. Still, he had been impressed by the group's energy, determination, and courage. But he accepted the actions taken by the Federal Republic of Germany to stop them. Mostly he saw it all as futile.

As he told Jan Thorn-Prikker, Richter was haunted by the violence perpetrated by the gang and the futility of their lives and deaths. They were martyrs on the altar of ideology. As subjects for art, there were many themes and contradictions. The theme of death is paintable, perhaps the ultimate artistic theme, but these deaths were dramatic and symbolic. He told Thorn-Prikker, "And then the monstrous strength, the frightening power, that one has an idea that could lead to death, that is for me the most impressive and unexplainable, that we can come up with ideas that are almost always false and crazy, but above all dangerous." He was struck most by the destructive power of ideas. "Religious wars and I don't know what else, that really are based on nothing, only pure nonsense—and that we take to the most bitter, fanatical ends even to death" (Elger and Obrist 231).

The narrative in the catalog that accompanied the first exhibits in Krefeld and Frankfurt framed the questions surrounding the Baader-Meinhof paintings in four categories. (1) The first category deals with the gang members and their activities. It also deals with the reactions of the state and the media and the people who were involved. (2) The second category deals with the judicial aspects of the events and whether the actions of the government were just or unjust according to conflicting views. There were also issues of whether or not an artist should or could paint something that was so recently in

the public's awareness. Had enough time passed to view the events artistically? (3) The third category deals with the artist's motives in choosing the theme. (4) The fourth category deals with the artist's methods of painting the series and how he fits in the hierarchy of art history (*Catalog 11*).

However many categories and questions have been posed, for the purposes of this thesis the questions relate to the reasons the artist made the normal choices an artist has to make with the heightened tensions of working on a controversial subject. Richter had long collected photographs and articles from newspapers and magazines, keeping them in his *Atlas*, or album. He often painted from those photographs, many of them typical family scenes, especially in the early 1960s. He had been collecting articles and photographs related to all aspects of the Baader-Meinhof Gang for a decade. His collection included more than one hundred photographs that were out of focus, blurred or fuzzy. He collected another one hundred that were in clear focus. He made the decision not to show the terrorist actions, but rather the terrorists, their imprisonment and deaths. None of the victims of the group are shown.

Thorn-Prikker asked about his selection criteria for which photographs to paint. Richter responded that it had been an unconscious process; he looked constantly at the various photographs until it became clear to him which would be the correct ones. He studied hundreds of photographs of the Baader-Meinhof Gang, their actions, their lives before terrorism, their arrests and trials, and their suicides and funeral until certain ones felt right. As a classically trained artist, he apparently also considered "the classic

painterly genres (portrait, still life, interiors, and figure composition" (Storr, *Gerhard Richter Forty Years of Painting* 76.) When Thorn-Prikker asked Richter about the meaning of the dead RAF members as ideological martyrs, Richter made it clear that he was not against one particular ideology, but all of them. In Richter's review of the hundreds of photographs, he ultimately focused on the personalities and their last breaths. He eliminated scenes of the pre-RAF days, their crime scenes, the victims, and the second-generation leaders. Elger writes, "He initially imagined that the project would demand unusually large paintings and wide-ranging subject matter. But as he worked, the selection of images narrowed and he found himself concentrating on the specific events of "Oct. 18, 1977" (Elger, *A Life in Painting* 300). Richter "concentrated on the terrible denouement of their destructive, self-destructive, and ultimately futile efforts at toppling the German power structure and transforming Germany (Storr, *Gerhard Richter Forty Years of Painting* 75). While Richter told Thorn-Prikker that there would have been an audience for corpses and violence, he was not going for the sensational.

Richter lived with these images for a year, collecting photographs and articles and thinking about them long before he started on the first canvas. Something about this history compelled him to address it, if only for himself. The mystery we still cannot reveal is why it had such a hold on him. He became a special witness to history, almost unconsciously, to forever be associated with an era of horrific violence, reflecting it in such a provocative way. And even though his country rejected his work and wanted it hidden away, the cycle re-emerges to confront his countrymen with hard truths. The era,

the violence, the participants will not be forgotten, a forever reminder that the soul of a country is made up of many parts, and there was good and evil on both sides. He chose to paint the gang leaders in death, thus asking his audience to start at that point and move backwards, looking at the essential question that only each viewer can answer: was what these rebels did worth it? Were they heroes or simply foolish?

Richter based his work on the photo archives of the magazines *Der Spiegel* and *Der Stern*. He also relied on the 1984 book by Stefan Aust, the *Baader-Meinhof -- Complex*. "Stefan Aust's book was very important to me," he said. "Such knowledge of the people (involved), knowing the people, was basic to the pictures." (Elger, *A Life* 300). There were also photographs of the group included in the book, which could have supplemented the photographs Richter already had collected.

When it came to what colors to use to show the suicides, Richter returned to the grays from his earlier photo-paintings, which he had not used in twenty years. He could have picked black and white with a splash of red for drama, or used realistic colors. But he chose to use gray, black and white only. This neutralization downplayed the violence inherent in the suicides, the arrests, and funeral. Storr believes that Richter chose the subject matter to point out the "tragic dimensions of the twentieth century, a tragedy deeply rooted in a tendency to see things ideologically in black and white, for which Richter's signature gray—and in these pictures the most somber and chilling of grays—is the emblem of an anguished uncertainty about historical truth as well as of a principled

refusal to take sides in a contest of destructive absolutes” (Storr *Gerhard Richter Doubt and Belief in Painting* 6).

The colors did not add to the drama, but rather cooled down the theme, so that the viewer might feel more like a neutral observer. One reviewer at the time wrote, “The unclear gray tones contain a general belief of Richter concerning the relationship between picture and creation: Pictures are never unsharp. What we see as unclear is in actuality inexactness” (Imdahl, .” *Westdeutsche Zeitung; Rheinische Post, Westdeutsche Allgemeine* – 21.März, 1989) (Georg Imdahl „Die grauen Bilder vom Untergang der Terroristen: Gerhard Richters Stammheim-Arbeiten“). Another reviewer noted, “Another good point is that the pictures require a certain distance in order to see them as clearly as the artist allows” (*Weltkunst* Nr. 7 from 29. April- 4. June, 1989).

Should the paintings be life-sized, larger, or smaller than life? Each has its advantage for an artist to capture the viewer’s attention. Richter chose to mix up the sizes. Several are life-sized images of the individuals. The portrait of Ulrike Meinhof is much larger than the photo. The painting of the arrest of Holger Meins, which includes an armored vehicle, is large scaled to emphasize the smallness of the captive next to the tank. The paintings of the living Gudrun Ensslin are approximately one third larger than real life, as is the case with the youthful portrait of Ulrike Meinhof. Richter suggests that he chose this size because “it was a helpless wish that life is bigger than death” (Elger and Obrist, *Writings* 230). The largest painting is of the funeral scene. Richter points out that it could not be painted life size because it would have been over eighty meters long.

But, he added, "in comparison with the experience it is small" (Elger and Obrist , *Writings* 230). Using a mix of sizes allowed Richter to achieve a certain balance. When he began the project he conceived of it as "a gigantic theme, which would require gigantic paintings. That is why it became a cycle, but it is not over-dimensional, but rather modest" (Elger and Obrist, *Writings* 230).

Richter finished the paintings, nineteen in all, in nine months of 1988. He said that the work went relatively quickly. The portraits would take around two days, but the ones with a lot of detail, like the funeral scene, took much longer. Another choice Richter had to make was which ones to present. Most artists would do a diptych or triptych, but he had nineteen paintings. He chose fifteen.

What have I painted: Three times, Baader, Shot. Three times Ensslin, hanged. Three times the head of the dead Meinhof after they cut her down. Once the dead Meins. Three times Ensslin, neutral (almost like a pop star). Then a big unspecific burial—a cell dominated by a bookcase, a silent gray record player, a youthful portrait of Meinhof, sentimental in a bourgeois way, twice the arrest of Meins, forced to surrender to the clenched power of the State. All the pictures are dull, gray, mostly very blurred, diffuse. (Elger, *A Life in Painting*, 283)

Only two of the three paintings of the dead Baader were included. Richter painted three versions of Ensslin hanging in her cell, but only one remains. He painted a version of the starving Meins on his deathbed, but did not include it and later overpainted it. According to Elger, the reason Richter uses multiple versions of the same painting is that he believed that one viewpoint was impossible.

Comparisons of Richter's style of painting and the photographs themselves are inevitable. Richter's methods are at odds with the ideals of photorealism. Sometimes he uses sfumato technique that seems to hover over the surface. This technique developed by Michelangelo is used to blur the edges and smooth over the content. He sweeps rich impastos vertically over *Cell* and horizontally over *Funeral* to disguise or to abstract subject matter that is almost too horrible to view. Richter is not appealing to the voyeur who cannot resist looking at the traffic accident on the side of the road, but his somber meditation on the subject of violence and death reveals that there is something to be understood in the experience of viewing the works.

Blurring in Richter's work serves as, or references, something akin to a photographic characteristic as well. In the final step of making a painting, Richter manipulates the surface while it is still wet, creating the optical effect of photographic blurring. He either smears the paint in horizontal strokes, as in *Woman Descending a Staircase*, thus enhancing the sense of dynamic movement, or he blurs the borders between all objects equally, as in *Terest Andeszka*. Either way, the blurring indexes the inexact relation between an object and its perception—or, as some critics explain it, a technical mistake that transpires if a camera or its subject moves at the instant the shutter is released. Because paint on canvas can never be out of focus, this creative blurring actually strengthens the tension and ambivalence between painting and photography. Blurring becomes, then, the visible sign of a much more complex interplay between the two mediums. In Richter's painting, it references not only a technical limitation of photography but also the pictorialist movement toward the end of the nineteenth century. ((Elger, *A Life in Painting* 85)

The lack of focus and clarity emphasizes Richter's rejection of a definitive truth. Richter could see both viewpoints and understand both sides in the conflict and object to both. He could see beyond black and white to the grays. Richter returned to many of his earlier

techniques in order to paint the Baader-Meinhof cycle. He had not used the gray tones for almost two decades. He had not used the blurring techniques either. Yet with his return to his older style, he brought something new. The blurriness is different when he repeats a scene, like the ones of the dead Baader or Meinhof. Each version becomes more and more unclear and simplified, as if the portrait, like the subject, is fading away from view and memory. In the exhibit catalog interview, Richter explained the difference between the photograph and the painting this way, “The photograph releases the horrifying and the painting concerns itself with mourning. That would come closer to my viewpoint.”

Every artist must make choices of theme, color, size, repetitive elements, composition, and style. A good artist knowingly makes such choices to bring balance and completion which will entice the viewer to linger and study the work. When working with a controversial subject the artist's choices become even more important in achieving balance and the concentrated attention of the audience. Richter did so by creating a whole new genre of painting. As Richter noted, the sharp photograph conveys horror; his gray, blurred painting of the photograph evoke a deep sense of mourning.

CHAPTER V

ANALYSIS OF THE PAINTINGS

Richter never refers to the subjects of his paintings by name, only by an attribute or object, with titles such as *Dead* or *Record Player*. This is a distancing mechanism, as is his use of the gray scale and the blurring technique. Richter is not painting portraits of the dead Baader-Meinhof Gang leaders and their surroundings, but rather symbols of failed fanaticism and misguided violence. The paintings also show each one of the Baader-Meinhof prisoners in isolation, usually at a point when the person is confronting his or her fate. All of the paintings are based on official police photographs that had been released to the media. In all fifteen of the works, Richter uses painterly techniques to create something more than the duplication of the photographs. He crops the space to focus attention on the object or person he is depicting. Extraneous detail is either blurred or left out of the space with the one exception of the funeral painting where there is so much detail filling up the space that it makes the viewer dizzy and unable to focus. Richter compared the meaning of these paintings to his previous abstracts: "The abstract paintings formulate something like a faith in the making of beauty. In the photo-paintings it's the hope of being able to pass judgment on one's own period, or compress one's period into a picture. Or at least by reporting, to help enlighten people. To see how it is"

(Richter 239). Here he is making the connections to history and the personal to that history.

Although the limitations of space in a gallery or museum determine the actual presentation of the work, Richter prescribed a certain order to the fifteen works, which he called a cycle with no beginning or end. Following Richter's chronology, the cycle begins with the three-part painting called *Dead* (plates 1, 2, 3). It shows the head and torso of Ulrike Meinhof lying on the floor of her cell, with a rope still around her neck. The next painting is the one called *Hanged* (plate 4), which shows a figure, this time Gudrun Ensslin, hovering by a window in a space shown in a very abstract manner. Next are the two paintings called *Man Shot Down* (plates 5, 6), with a man lying on the floor left arm extended away from the body. Following these two paintings comes *Cell* (plate 7), showing a blurred view of Andreas Baader's cell with its bookcases and coat stand. *Confrontation* 1, 2, 3 (plates 8, 9, and 10) follow *Cell*. In *Confrontation* we see Gudrun Ensslin as she passes in front of the camera on her way to or from her cell. In three views that look like a film sequence, she first becomes aware of a camera, smiles, and then turns away to walk from the camera's view. *Youth Portrait* (plate 11) comes next in the Richter chronology, showing a much romanticized version of a very young Ulrike Meinhof before she joined the terrorists. The picture called *Record Player* (Plate 12) shows just the record player, tightly cropped, in which the pistol Baader used to shoot himself had been hidden. Following *Record Player* comes the *Funeral* (plates 13, 14), which shows three coffins being carried to the cemetery in Stuttgart. To complete the

cycle Richter shows two paintings called *Arrest* (plates 15, 16), which are hard to decipher, but are supposed to show the arrest of one of the RAF members in a public place. The second painting is even blurrier and more abstract than the first, just as Richter did with the paintings of the dead Meinhof. The titles help the viewer a little, but they do not give a lot of information or opinion. There are no other clues, and the images feel very empty. With their blurred grisaille effects, they give few hints of a working narrative. The logic of the order of the works is baffling.

In the three pictures called *Dead*, the artist painted a triptych of the head and upper torso of the dead Meinhof lying on her cell floor after being taken down by the guards. The rope is visible around her neck. Usually each part of a triptych would be similar in size, but each painting here is different in size, the first version is 62 x 67 cm, the second version is 62x62 cm, while the third one is smaller at 35x40 cm. Each of the paintings is the same subject, but different in view, the head and torso emphasized by the shallowness of the space, the lack of detail, and dark shadowing. There is a bas relief quality to the pose, which refers back to earlier works like *The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb* an oil and tempera on limewood painting created by Hans Holbein the Younger between around 1520. In version one the figure is more diffuse than in figure two, and it corresponds in most details to the photograph published in *Stern* on July 16, 1976. The rope is not as clear, and the head is surrounded in dark gray with the floor and the cell wall blending as shadows to isolate the light patches on the face and the blouse. The figure occupies most of the central portion of the canvas, with a space above and below

her of roughly equal proportions and clarity. Meinhof could be sleeping except for the title which is the only clue Richter gives the viewer. There is no way to tell what the figure was lying on, or where she was. In the second version there is more clarity of detail of the rope around the neck, the left shoulder, and ear. The cell wall has been given a darker color which gives more contrast to the figure as a whole, isolating it even more. The figure is only occupying the bottom half of the canvas, and the dark cell wall fills most of the remaining space forcing the viewer to focus on the more detailed aspects of the figure. The third and much smaller painting still allows a diffused view of the rope, but gives a clearer detail of the face and its sunken, closed eyes; the lips and nose are also clearer, and more relaxed than in the previous paintings. The head shows an expression more clearly, but here one can observe quite quickly that this is a dead person, whose life force is no longer present. The floor on which the figure lies is a lighter gray, and the shadow of the body shows a little more, while the cell wall has just become a dark patch that blends into the hair. The figure of Meinhof occupies more of the canvas space, with a little more of the top quadrant of dark cell wall and continuing it for a small section to the right side of the canvas. The floor is still not clear, but it takes up a little more space than can be seen in either version 1 or 2. The line of the figure is more blurred with the background than in the previous paintings. Richter has made subtle changes which a camera could not make. Repetition is an old artists' trick, but Richter uses it in the cycle, not by repeating shapes and colors on different parts of the canvas, but rather by repeating the same image three times with subtle variations. The viewer

pauses to look at what the differences are between them, and thus gives the artist what he needed, the time and attention of the viewer.

Just as the paintings have become smaller in size in each successive piece, the images of Meinhof become more diffused. There is less of her. It is as though we are seeing the soul leaving the body. Richter is showing the soul-destroying quality of her violent actions but also the soul-destroying quality of the system that was built to fight terrorism. By the time of Meinhof's death, the gang had become so focused on breaking out the ones in jail that they had lost sight of their original cause. By now, Meinhof's Manifesto and other philosophical writings were of no relevance whatsoever, and she knew it.

Hanged is 200 x 140 cm, and is probably the darkest of all the images and the most mysterious. This is Ensslin's suicide. The title helps the viewer understand the scene. The painting of Ensslin hanging from the window cage in her cell is softened from the photograph but intensified by Richter's use of her coat to the left of the frame, an intense white space on the right of the frame and a blurred gray for the bottom third of the frame in order to make the figure look like she is floating or standing on something high. The title gives the hint that the situation is more sinister than either floating or standing on a stool, and the angle of the figure, particularly the head, makes it clear that this is a suicide. The painting shows the full figure with the bottom of the legs blurred into the shadows of the floor. The head is barely defined, with no expression visible. The window cage is clearer than the figure itself, and the other details of the cell are given almost as

much emphasis as the figure. Richter gives more context than he does in some of the other cycle paintings. The mirror to the left of Ensslin's form reflects her dark shadow. The dark coat on the left of the painting could be almost any dark form, and contrasts with the very light right side of the cell and frames the figure. The figure of the hanged Ensslin occupies only about ten percent of the central right quadrant of the canvas, but her death permeates the dark spaces. The window cage behind the figure and the mirror on the back wall emphasizes the smallness of the space. Even though the bottom third of the painting is mostly a gray blur of various degrees of light and shadow, it does help to define the floor space as well. Richter painted three versions of Ensslin hanging in her cell, but only included this one in the cycle. Even though there are a few more details surrounding the dead figure of Ensslin, the viewer is still pushed to focus on the isolation of the woman, the smallness of her life at the end. All that remains of the once energetic and forceful woman seen in the confrontation triptych, is a gaunt shadow in a space where the walls are closing in on her.

Using repetition again, Richter chose to give two views of the death of Baader, which Richter titled *Shot Down*. The title is ambiguous, just as there is doubt about whether Baader shot himself or was executed in his cell. The paintings are both 100 x 140 cm. Richter chose to show the body in a three-quarter length pose and not just his head and upper torso as he did with the Meinhof works. Richter eliminated the staring eyes and the blood pooling around his head that were visible in the published photograph. Richter never wanted to sensationalize the violence he showed in the paintings. He aimed to

keep the images as neutral as possible considering the ghastly quality of some of the subject matter. The first version is close to the actual photograph although less gruesome. The blurring and limited colors leave the figure mostly unclear. The unnatural position of the body with its outstretched left arm and closed left hand makes the viewer aware that something ghastly has happened, but does not clarify the exact event. The eye is drawn to the lighter patches on the shirt, the neck, face, and arms, as well as the objects located behind the head, which are not clearly defined in the space. The figure of Baader is located more in the upper quadrant of the canvas, stretching across it to fill the space almost completely. The little dark gray space above the body just serves to provide enough contrast to emphasize the figure, not to tell the viewer where the body was lying. There is more of the gray floor showing in the first painting than in the second one, taking up a triangular space for most of the bottom third of the canvas with only the outstretched arm crossing through the central part of the implied floor. The gun that was in his hand in the photograph is not shown. The second painting makes the body insubstantial and ghostly. The figure is again shown on the floor, but more of the wall is visible, with shadowy dark spaces surrounding the top half of the figure of the dead Baader. The figure is seen closer to the edge all around, almost centered, and the left hand is not shown at all, which breaks the normal rules for artists portraying the human figure. The shooting is not what was important to Richter, nor the grisly nature of the body's condition as would have been seen in the original photograph. In the only two images Richter gave us of the brash and charismatic Baader, Richter uses the elements of

space and shadows, and the diffused nature of his blurring technique to show the futility of Baader's actions and the consequences. He forces us to see the isolation and ignominy of the once most-wanted criminal in Germany. The face of the second figure is indistinct and not as clearly defined in the contrast with the background and foreground as was the case in the first painting. The objects behind the head are more cut off and unclear, and the colors are darker with less contrast. The light patches have been lowered in value eliminating the stark contrasts of the first painting. Richter did three paintings of the dead Baader, but displayed only two of them. He has never explained his choices. However it is clear that the paintings might still exist somewhere, since in the 2012 retrospective show in Berlin, Richter loaned another copy of the Ensslin hanging series from his own collection, which he had painted over in white and titled *Blanket*.

Richter personalized the images of the two women, Meinhof and Ensslin, by focusing on their faces, but Baader, the group's other namesake, is shown only as a lifeless, faceless body. This makes sense because the women were the real terrorists. They voiced the philosophical underpinnings of the movement, authored the manifestos, and directed the action, especially Ensslin. Baader just wanted the action.

The paintings of Baader's cell emphasize the closed up, narrow world in which he lived his last hours: a record player which did not play but hid the gun; the book cases which held his whole intellectual life. The blurred image of the cell is certainly more mysterious than the photograph. In the interview published in the catalog that accompanied the first exhibition, Jan Thorn-Prikker tells Richter:

I compared a couple of the paintings with the photographs. There are some really major changes. In the prison cell picture, for instance, this is most evident. The picture reaches out impulsively to the viewer. In those days the argument was heard again and again that a cell with a record player, with books (not just three books, but three hundred) must be every bit as comfortable as living in a hotel. I found in your picture the reality of a cell reproduced perfectly. The hell of an enclosed space with no way out. (*Catalog* 131, trans. G. Cope)

Richter responded that he had thought the painting might be too simplistic, and that he had done an exact replica of the cell but then painted it out with his blurring techniques. Richter not only wanted to paint the idea of a prison cell, but to show the specific cell in which Baader died. Richter's use of the space is interesting to observe. The book cases fill the right side of the canvas almost completely and extend into the center of the space. The books are the clearest thing Richter shows, and occupy by far the largest amount of space. Since Richter usually uses his cropping of the space to emphasize what is most important, and here it is the overwhelming number of books in the cell that held meaning for the artist. Many of the observers of the cell painting professed to be surprised at the quantity of the books. Baader had almost three hundred books alone, and the group had access to any books they wanted and multiple magazine subscriptions. The group met together openly for several hours of each day, and with their lawyers daily. Yet one is struck by the lack of life, the isolation, and even claustrophobia of the cell. The huge filled bookcases only seem to enhance the smallness of Baader's life. There are allusions to the other aspects of walls, ceiling and floor that give the image of a cell. but the details are so blurry as to be not much more than markers. The open lighter quality of the left

side of the painting contrasts with the cluttered right side, and gives the eye a resting place as it moves through the space, stopping here and there to observe the black splotch, or the shadowy space next to the book cases. They have no meaning, except as part of the whole.

In the triptych *Confrontation* Ensslin passes in front of the camera going to or from her cell. In three views Richter creates the effect of a film sequence in which Ensslin becomes aware of the camera, turns to face it and smiles, then turns away to walk on, caught up in her own thoughts. All the paintings are the same size, 112x102cm, and show the torso and head of Ensslin in a more than life-sized view. The paintings are closely cropped to the figure showing very little of the surroundings which are blurred and of a neutral gray to accentuate the darker color used for the figure. The first painting shows the figure of Ensslin in three quarter view. The figure is centered in the space with more space to the right in a slightly lighter shade of gray. The top of the head comes almost to the top edge of the frame, and there is a little space to the left of the figure, but half of it is taken up with the shadow of Ensslin, indicating movement towards the camera. The figure extends to the bottom of the frame to just above the waist. Her features are not very distinct, but clear enough to know that she is a young, slender woman, wary but not afraid. There is a heavy dark shadow around the back left side of the figure, especially behind the head. The lightest areas are the face and neck and the area to the right where Ensslin is going. The second painting in the triptych shows Ensslin as she faces the camera and smiles. The view is almost full frontal, with more

distinct features, and the hair and clothing are also more distinct. The shadows are much more clearly defined. The figure fills the closely cropped space taking up everything except a small space to the left of the head and a clear area to her right which is done in variegated shades of gray, from lightest at the bottom to darkest at the top edge of the frame. We see her face and expression. She is smiling and vibrant. The third a shows a side view profile of Ensslin as she walks away from the camera. The figure fills almost the whole left side of the painting, but this time there is more clear area to the figure's right which takes up from almost the center to the right side of the frame. The head extends almost to the edge of the top of the frame, while the torso again extends to the bottom of the frame to below the figure's waist. Again the features are not as distinct, and the expression on her face is hard to interpret. The shadow to the left of the figure has become larger and blends with the clothing and darker values of the left side to such an extent that the figure seems to emerge from the shadow into the lighter gray area in front of her, and to the right of the painting.

In the first view, Ensslin is simply there, caught by the camera. In the second view, she faces the camera full on with that open, vibrant smile. She has noticed the camera and is pleased with the attention. She is caught in the limelight, something she always craved. In the final view, the slump of the body, emphasized by the dark shadows, is the posture of resignation, of having given up. In the middle image, we see her as she might have been before she became violent. As with others of Richter's repetitions, the last view has the finality of an ending.

The sentimental photograph of a very young Meinhof that Richter chose for *Youth Portrait* is another interesting editing choice. The artist chose to paint it larger than life-sized at 67x62 cm., as he did with some others. He has never explained why he sized them this way. The face and implied torso and right arm fill almost the whole frame, closely cropped in to the figure with only a small edging of black around the outside edges to frame the face and focus the view. Richter softened the face and the look that Meinhof was giving in the photograph. This painting had Meinhof looking toward the right and not directly out at the viewer. She was shown with a meditative expression, the face and right hand clear but in soft focus. This was more of a picture for a senior year of high school or early university—dreamy, reflective, and middle class. Her hair was long and well groomed in contrast with the series of *Dead* paintings where her face was thinner and her hair much shorter and unstyled. The photograph was taken for a publicity shot for Meinhof's film *Bambule*, which was ready to be released just before she helped to break Baader out of prison in 1970. The photograph is appropriate to a successful writer and filmmaker, not a violent terrorist. This is the portrait of an activist and writer for over a decade, who had been married, divorced, and was the mother of twin daughters. She had survived a life-threatening operation. There is no hint that she was about to totally break with everything bourgeois. This is a picture of innocence, in stark contrast to the horrific paintings of her death six years later. Richter is pointing out that even an ordinary person can become a terrorist. Richter painted four separate images of Ulrike Meinhof, although she was dead a full year before the events that occurred on the

18th of October, 1977, and had not played the leading role in the group's decision making or even their philosophy. Meinhof was used as a cover for the group's less than intellectual approach, since she appealed to the liberals of the establishment of the time. The sentimental portrait of her betrays the cynicism of her actual function within the group. Of all of the members of the group, Meinhof was the most isolated, and alone, because in the power struggle with Gudrun Ensslin, she was ostracized by Ensslin and her followers, as well as belittled by Baader who found her too cerebral, and not sexy enough to be his partner. Baader even denigrated the political polemic between Meinhof and Ensslin as a cat fight mostly because he felt that they were fighting over him as a boyfriend, a view which reflected mostly his own vanity. The four images of Meinhof are usually hung close to each other, the before and after contrast exposes the consequences of her choices and actions.

Record Player, 62x83cm, was shown next in the Richter chronology, although it had been placed next to the cell painting as well. It showed a very close cropped version of a typical old record player of the time period. The record player was shown at an angle, not centered, almost coming out of the frame on the left side of the painting. What is to the right of the record player is not clear, but it is very close in value so that the record player appears to be almost embedded in it, and the area to the right which resembles fabric balances the space given to the record player. The use of the stark white for the label of the record, the top edges of the player, the line leading from the bottom of the player to the bottom edge of the frame is another typical artists' trick to keep the

viewer's eye moving around the space from one highlighted area to another. This was accentuated by the use of the lightest gray at the whole top of the frame, juxtaposed against the record which was the darkest gray, giving a nice contrast and helping to inform and give focus. If one did not know the circumstances of Baader's suicide, the inclusion of the record player would be a mystery. Knowing that the gun was hidden in the record player—and was never checked by the guards—makes the importance of the object much clearer. Otherwise the viewer is left with a puzzle couched in a blur.

Richter presents the record player as a symbolic image; among the paintings the only direct use of symbol. The record player did not work, so it could not produce music, but instead delivered the instrument of Baader's death. The record player also represents the ingenuity of the gang members and the laxity of their custodians. The dense space of the painting emphasizes its significance.

The only painting in which any of the Baader-Meinhof Gang members were shown together is also the largest, 200x320 cm. This work took Richter the longest to paint. The title is *Funeral* and it showed the three coffins of Baader, Ensslin, and Raspe on carts being escorted through the cemetery by mourners and press. The photograph was made in daylight and was so clear that one could make out the balaclava-covered faces of the mourners and those of the press and police who were watching them. The painting shows a blur of the masses, and the rolling carts with the three coffins are barely distinguishable. The trees of the cemetery are given only vague definition, except for one which has a cross-like appearance, either an accident of his blurring technique or

intentional ambiguity. The techniques used to create the blurred affects were feathering the edges of the shapes, and dragging his brushes or squeegees across the still-wet surfaces mostly in a horizontal direction. This could have been any large street scene; only the name and surrounding paintings give any clue as to the event. The values are so similar that the eye has a hard time finding a resting place. The patterns of light and dark are enough to keep the eye moving around, particularly the long segment of the road in the top quadrant of the painting. The diagonal white strip on the right bottom corner and the diagonal quality of the people's forms give energy and motion to the piece. The darkest values are used to help distinguish forms from each other. The three white rectangles towards the middle would purport to be the three coffins on carts being moved through the crowd, but they are so blurred that they could be just a part of the road. In this painting, and only this painting, Richter takes a wide-angled view, emphasizing the swirling masses of shapes and values. Nothing is closely cropped. He completely fills the canvas. The swirl of figures and movement expresses exactly how that era ended- nothing settled or resolved. Just as with this painting, you cannot tell the terrorists from the police, the onlookers from the protestors, we will never get perspective or clarity to extract a full understanding of the impact of this reign of terror. We know only that it is over. Only a small, indistinct image of a cross stands out. With this one painting Richter summed up his view of the cycle as a whole. The actions of both sides in the confrontation needed to be examined and not forgotten. The long-range view of history is not any clearer than the long-range view shown in *Funeral*.

In the diptych *Arrest*, 92x126cm, Richter gave an almost incomprehensible view of the arrest of Holger Meins. Meins was caught with Baader in a violent confrontation with police. After he surrendered, he was forced to strip off all of his clothes to show he was not armed. The frame of the first painting of the scene showed a diagonal series of shapes and lines and gradations of gray which added to the dynamic feeling of the confrontation between Meins and the authorities. There is an implied space of a large building taking up the whole left hand third of the space. The light areas of the building's walls contrast with the darker central space where the tank is confronting Meins. The right hand third is darker and some of the shapes can be recognized as cars lined up in a row but fading into a darker gray blur at the bottom right corner of the frame. The eye is drawn by the lighter car at the bottom right to the lightest three shapes along the right side up to the very white building whose lines lead back down the left side of the space. The first painting of the diptych shows one of the armored vehicles and a line of police cars, but the figure of Meins is so indistinct as to be almost invisible. The lightest areas from the middle left to almost the top left corner, give a feeling of depth to the scene and make the armored vehicle stand out a little. In the second painting of the diptych, the figure of Meins is clearer. The scene has been cropped to emphasize the figure, cars, and the armored vehicle, with Meins standing naked surrounded by all the power of the police. The second painting is so much more blurry, that even with its more compact nature it is difficult to get a sense of the meaning of the work, although that is not needed since the viewer has the first painting in the diptych to refer to for more clarity. There is

very little contrast and differentiation in the values and the blurring strokes go horizontally across the painting as they did in *Funeral* while the shapes, and shades of gray, are lined up on the diagonal. The effect emphasizes the impotence of the single person against the power of the regime. This image was one of Richter's clearer statements about why he chose the terrorists as his subject matter. He had lived through two successive totalitarian regimes. He had experienced first-hand the powerlessness of the people and the futility of fighting despots. Richter painted Meins' arrest, but not his death. Meins went on a hunger strike and died of starvation in 1974.

Each one of the fifteen paintings of the cycle has been altered in ways that amount to what some critics have called "depainting" or "unpainting". Storr describes the effect:

What Richter wants us to understand is directly connected to the difficulties of visual access he puts in our way. The contradictory impression resulting from Richter's unpainting is to push the physical reality of the painting forward while pushing the image back, so that it seems to retreat as the viewer advances to have a better view of the painterly manipulations that body it forth. (Storr, *Doubt* 246)

Richter used shades of gray to show that the events were in the past. Gray also was a color associated with his past techniques. His shades of gray were a way to establish distance. Storr said about the color choice, "It is impossible to paint the misery of life, except maybe in gray, to cover it" (*Doubt* 247). Richter felt that gray, unlike any other color, helped to make nothingness visible, and was the only equivalent to indifference or an absence of opinion. Richter's gray scale, which left off most of the top level and at times even some of the bottom shades, is in contrast with the neo-

expressionist painting that was in vogue at the time. It updates the tradition of chiaroscuro painting in that rather than using extremes of light and dark to reveal the subject matter, Richter's use of the grisaille range conceals the subject matter. Richter is showing how time can blur the facts, and the distance of time can also allow some perspective on the horror of the group's actions and their fate.

When Richter uses repetition as a device, he repeats the entire image, rather than shape or color, or other element. With each iteration, he alters the image but in each case the last image has finality to it. Richter is telling us, repeatedly, that it is over and it ended badly. The damage is done, and the lives have been lost. The repercussions reverberate through the years, yet the images haunt us and tell us to never forget. The fifteen paintings together create a narrative that no single piece epitomizes. Richter was right, the paintings must be shown together to achieve the impact he desired. He may have said that he has taken a neutral stance, but he does have a point of view. He wants the viewer to reach his own conclusions, so long as he understands the futility of radicalism and its consequences.

CHAPTER VI

REACTIONS TO THE CYCLE

Reactions to the first showing of *October 18, 1977* were swift and diverse, coming from art critics, the public, sympathizers of the Baader-Meinhof group, and families of the victims. The cycle continues to draw passionate commentary today as interest in the gang gets triggered over and over. As recently as last year an Australian musician created an opera in which he brings Richter into Meinhof's prison cell for a conversation. Whether intended or not, Richter's paintings have merged with the history of violence and terror that reigned for a decade. His work is recognized as one of the most important statements about the events. Many reactions to the paintings were as much about the gang as about the art. As time passes, the cycle takes on new significance, less connected to the history and more about mourning for the loss of humanity.

The first exhibition of *October 18, 1977* took place in Krefeld in 1988 at the Museum Haus Esters. It was supposed to open at the Gallery Portikus in Frankfurt am Main, but there was a switch to Krefeld, a smaller city less associated with the Baader-Meinhof group. Richter also had a special relationship with the curator of the museum in Krefeld, and felt he could trust him to debut the cycle in a low-key way. The initial response affirmed that decision. Elger and Obrist wrote, "The paintings astonished the

public. Their provocative subject matter was (and is) unique in Richter's work. An artist who had never taken a political position was suddenly exploring a controversial and divisive topic from recent German history" (Elger and Obrist *Writings* 301).

Even in 2002, Michael Kimmelman writing in the New York Times described the cycle as a "Rorschach test." Opinion divided between those who opposed the gang, and found the works too sympathetic, and those who supported the gang, and found the work too unsympathetic.

In an interview from 1998, a decade after the paintings' debut, the artist Georg Baselitz still expressed a vehement opinion: "I was ashamed as a painter because I think that as a painter living today, you can't just paint a completely distressing image of history because then you are demanding grand subject matter" (Elger and Obrist 302). As a German post-World War II artist, Baselitz objected to any such depiction of "grand" historical subjects, stating that after what happened at the concentration camps like Auschwitz, such subjects were no longer appropriate. "But Richter succumbs, makes mistakes, and in my opinion, stupid mistakes in which he with his sentimentality or senility tosses too much fodder to the masses" (Elger and Obrist 302).

Others in the art world had a more favorable response. Many of the reviews of the first exhibitions showed an appreciation of the work's aesthetic achievements. Heinrich Stachelhaus wrote: "With these fifteen paintings, Richter finds himself, from a purely artistic standpoint, at the zenith of his creativity. It is excellent painting, in terms of the sensitively graduated gray values between black and white and the composition" (Elger

and Obrist 302). Jean-Christophe Ammann, director of The Museum für Moderne Kunst in Frankfurt am Main, wrote about Richter's work: "Gerhard Richter has created a work that no one but he could have created, because it fits seamlessly into the painterly process that he has developed and maintained for decades. Nevertheless, it stands out as the inexorable truth, created in a time in which art is seeking its own legitimacy" (Elger and Obrist 302-304).

These comments by Christa Häusler writing in the German magazine *Chronik* were typical: "The paintings only allow the situation to be recognized in a very vague way. It is as if looking through a filter, the details disappear, the total picture is reduced to the most important things" Häusler also said "Richter shocks us, in that he confronts us with death. And he goes further, when he takes away the anonymity of the dead, our surprise increases even more, as if he laid his finger against a wound which has not healed even to this day".

When the paintings were first shown outside of Germany, there was a concern that they could not be understood without some historical context added to the exhibit. Amanda Sebestyn, a British critic, suggested in a review of the exhibit in London in 1989, that the pictures "have been locked in an art historical deep-freeze" (Usselman 5). Sebestyn concluded that the audience could only understand the work with a superstructure of information attached to them in some way. Richter preferred for the paintings to be shown without extra information. He thought the audience might spend more time reading about the events and people portrayed in the cycle than they actually

spent looking at the paintings. However, Usselman and the critic Walter Benjamin suggested that the cycle should be viewed as an allegory. (4) During the first North American tour of *October 18, 1977* there was an extensive amount of information surrounding the works in order to help the public understand what they were seeing. If the works are allegorical, then they could transcend their time, their superstructure of information, and their original shock value. According to Usselman:

Perhaps, dislocated as they are now from their original telos, Richter's Oktober cycle could continue to release cathartic energies and be transformed into a nonspecific work of mourning. In a society that is marked by ever-more-frequent outbursts of violence, by murder and state executions, this role could not be more appropriate. Could Richter's work not mourn the loss of humanity, the absence of mercy, and the depth of hatred that so often scar our condition? Could we not all mourn, together, the fate of the anonymous death row inmate or the senseless killing of loved ones as we have been mourning our failings in the Baader-Meinhof trauma? (6)

Treating the works as an allegory means that there would be no need for the major superstructure of information that bound them to the actual people and events. The question is whether a new audience will make the effort to study the paintings without the explanations.

In his article "*The Unblinking Blur*," Robert Hughes describes the American reaction to the Baader-Meinhof paintings:

When the Baader-Meinhof paintings were shown in New York some ten years ago, they came under clumsy attack from right-wing critics. Here, went the cry, was the pseudo-radical art world up to its nefarious tricks, making heroes out of terrorists. . . Nothing could have been farther from the truth. Richter is not, and never has been a radicalism groupie; he's not

even a man of the left. He is a remarkably measured and thoughtful painter who despises theatrics, especially the theatrics of violence that play a low, deadly game with human life in the name of idealism, as the Baader-Meinhof gang did. It's no mystery why some nostalgic radicals think of Richter as a capitalist stooge, while some conservatives fancy he's a leftie. The reason is, he's doing something right, and that something lies beyond politics, in the domain of real and noble painting. (6)

Peter Schjeldahl states that the suite of paintings "has generated more discursive heat while shedding less light of common understanding than anything else in the art of the past half century" (98). The *Der Spiegel* critic wrote of the paintings: "They are crass, they are banal and, in a manner that is difficult to grasp, beautiful, sometimes all at once" (Elger and Obrist 302).

Elisabeth Kiderlen (29) writing in a German publication, discussed Richter's reasons for painting and exhibiting the paintings, noting that the artist had said there was unfinished business, an unhealed wound on the German psyche, which needed to be addressed. His work posed an even more important question: Does an artist have a right to paint a controversial or overwhelming topic from his own time? Kiderlen wonders if anyone could have dealt a blow to the utopian dreams of the left as well as Richter had done with *October 18, 1977*. She said the paintings left her feeling that the people and events should rest in peace, and it was finally time to come to terms with the RAF's activities and the government's response. She ends asking how the RAF prisoners, as well as the family and friends of the terrorists and their victims, would react to the paintings.

Bertram Müller wrote in the *Rheinische Post*, a local newspaper covering the second exhibit, that the paintings reminded him of looking at an old family album with just a slight connection to the present time. He also felt that the paintings were meaningful, and were painted at an impossibly early time for such distance. Georg Imdahl, writing a review of the second exhibition in the regional newspaper, said the artist was portraying uncertainty with the blurred nature of the paintings as compared to the clear photographs from which they were taken.

There were more reactions to the second exhibition at the Portikus Gallery in Frankfurt am Main. Christa Häusler, writing for the *Chronik*, called the cycle "shocking, violent and at the same time fascinating" (Häusler 25). Yet Häusler thinks that the exhibit alone cannot get to all the other discussions and questions which need to be debated. She compares the cycle to Goya's *Third of May, 1809* and David's *The Death of Marat* painted in 1793.

A group sympathetic to the RAF gave its own review of the second exhibition. They were unhappy with the lack of information accompanying the exhibit, and complained that there was no time given for a public discussion. They remarked on the lack of publicity for the opening as well (Kunst 9). The review was timed to coincide with and draw attention to a hunger strike by the RAF prisoners, citing unfair treatment. The group, *Kunst Geht Zur Sache* (Art Comes to the Point, Trans. G. Cope), said the state was trying to break the prisoners' spirit. They stated that the way a government treats its dissenters and even terrorists must be in accordance with constitutional law.

One of the reasons that Richter had such low key openings for the first showings was his concern for the victims of the Baader-Meinhof gang and their families. He was also concerned with the relatives of the gang, especially Meinhof's daughters, who had suffered enough. Other concerns were the members of the Baader-Meinhof gang who were still alive, and mostly in prison. Many of them were close to being released and Richter did not wish to stir up emotions against them. Gregorio Magnani criticized the artist when he interviewed him:

You are claiming a different status for these paintings from that of normal artistic production, including your own. There was no museum opening for their presentation in Krefeld, the spotlights were off, the work isn't for sale, and you are allowing only certain paintings to be reproduced. You insist that this series must not be treated as consumer items. This strikes me as a utopic gesture. (Richter 96)

According to Magnani, Richter had been afraid of a big public spectacle which the media might make about the work. He also did not want people chatting and drinking wine as if it were a gallery opening for his normal work. He felt that the museum atmosphere was the better setting (96).

Richter feared that patrons of the galleries that showed his work might withdraw funding if they perceived the work as too controversial. After the first gallery showing, the paintings went on a two-year tour in Europe and the United States. Richter then loaned the paintings to a Frankfurt museum for a ten-year period, thinking they might find a permanent home there.

In 1995, Richter sold the cycle to the Museum of Modern Art in New York City for \$3 million. The furor over the works had died down and he no longer saw the need to keep them in Germany. The paintings were pulled from the Frankfurt museum a year early and shipped to their new home. Coincidentally, there was a resurgence of interest in the Baader-Meinhof gang as more members were being released from prison.

The move to MOMA was not well received in Germany by those who believed the paintings were important to the country and its history. Hubertus Butin (Richter 322) asked Richter why he had not left the cycle in Frankfurt, where they had been on a more or less permanent loan. The director, Jena-Christophe Ammann, had placed the cycle as one of the collection's highlights and had made great efforts to keep the paintings there. Richter responded that the museum didn't have the money to buy the paintings and he had never considered it the best location. He also believed that America would be able to see the work in a more general way:

Because the Americans are far removed from the topic of the RAF, they probably relate to it in more general terms—in terms that are relevant to every modern or even unmodern country: the overall danger of ideological beliefs, fanaticism, and mayhem. That's relevant in any country, including the U.S., which you rather sweepingly refer to as conservative. But I can also see another, more direct link between America and the RAF—and I don't mean the Vietnam War, which Baader and Ensslin protested against in 1968 by placing incendiary devices in two department stores in Frankfurt. I also see a link in the fact that the attitudes and lifestyles of the so-called 1968 movement were strongly influenced by American ideals. Even the movement's inherent anti-Americanism wasn't simply a reaction against U.S. hegemony, but was largely imported from America. (Richter 323-324)

Richter's concern about reactions from museum patrons proved accurate when one prominent patron withdrew funding from the Frankfurt museum. When Butini asked Richter about this, he replied:

It's understandable that Dresdner Bank initially found the paintings objectionable and retracted financial support for the Frankfurt Museum of Modern Art, considering that its chairman, Jürgen Ponto, was murdered. And regarding the few press statements that criticize MOMA for buying the paintings, they can more or less be ignored, since it's obvious that they don't have much weight. And it would be quite unnatural, terrible even, if everyone praised the decision. It's perfectly fine the way it is. (Richter 325)

Butini confronted Richter with the reaction of many of the Germans when he said that the paintings have a more important role to play for the cultural identity of the Germans and for helping to understand that period of their own history. Richter defends his decision, saying:

These paintings aren't more important for Germany than for America, if only for the reason that they are not suitable for the oft-quoted task of coming to terms with history. There are other places conceived for this, such as the House of History in Bonn; there you can look at the Manifestos and the equipment used by the RAF, and these exhibits would be wholly inappropriate in the United States. So things are getting mixed up here: on the one hand, there's, say, the historic material, on the other you have these paintings, which as I said deal with the topic in a general way. And one of the reasons why these depictions are so generally blurred and abstract in nature is that I most definitely didn't want to portray Gudrun or Ulrike—they are not education material for German history. (Richter 325)

Richter also said the MOMA is the best museum in the world. He was quite pleased to have his paintings there. He also liked the reviews from the American critics where the

appreciation was not biased by expectations and prejudice as they had been at times in Germany (Richter 327).

Housing the paintings in the United States led to another question, and Richter's interesting answer: Would he consider painting the 9/11 attacks in America? Richter said that he could not. He changed his mind. In 2009, Richter released his new painting, *September*. Storr has written a book based on the painting, September: A History Painting by Gerhard Richter. This year, just before the tenth anniversary of the attack, Richter released his new painting, *September*, now at MOMA. The piece is in his unpainting style, this time with some blue color, covered with a veil of gray. Scraps of paint produce marks eerily recalling the aircraft. *September* is included in a new retrospective exhibition of Richter's work, "Gerhard Richter: Panorama" at the Tate Modern in London through Jan. 8, 2012. *October 18, 1977* also will be shown. The retrospective honors his eightieth birthday. Ironically, Richter also had a personal connection to 9/11. He was on a plane bound for New York City when it was diverted because of the attacks.

According to the critic Blake Gopnik, Richter has said that his first attempt of painting the burning towers was not acceptable. "But rather than give up, Richter took his failed painting, scraped off most of its surface detail, and smeared an abstract veil of gray on top of what was left". (Gopnik)

This author was delighted to finally see the cycle in January 2012 when I attended the major retrospective of Richter's work in honor of his 80th birthday at the Tate Modern

in London. The enormity of the exhibit, covering Richter's full body of work and filling one floor of the museum, gave evidence to Richter's ranking as one of the most important modern German painters. The cycle *October 18, 1977* was presented in its own room, with only one informational sign about the works' significance. Visitors could move from painting to painting or sit on benches in the middle of the room to observe them as a whole. The roomy presentation allowed for viewing from a distance or up close. I spent some time there, alternately taking in the paintings themselves, making notes, and eavesdropping on the surrounding conversations, in German and English. I heard comments such as, "I had forgotten about this group of terrorists. I wonder what happened to the group after these leaders died." and "I always disliked these people and I never understood why Richter didn't show some paintings of the victims of their actions." They paid attention to how the paintings were made and talked about the events they represented. Germans were more aware of the history and spent more time with the paintings, while non-Germans moved fairly quickly through the room. The new painting, *September*, was shown with Richter's latest works.

When the three month Tate show closed in January, the exhibition was moved to Berlin, Germany. The cycle *October 18, 1977* was not included in the main show at the New National Gallery. It was on display at the Old National Gallery on Museum Island some miles away. This separation from the full body of Richter's work suggests the sensitivity of the subject matter that still exists in his home country. At Richter's request, an extra piece was included here that was not shown at the Tate or any previous showings

of the cycle. Titled *Blanket*, it is a white over-painted version of the hanging of Gudrun Ensslin. The retrospective was greeted enthusiastically by most of the German public and media, with long lines and sold out tickets, but it is doubtful that many will make the extra trip to see the cycle on Museum Island? It is more likely that the people who would ordinarily visit the historical museum on Museum Island would be the only ones to view the *October 18, 1977* paintings.

As the events behind *October 18, 1977* become less current and more historical, Richter's paintings can take on new and powerful meaning as mourning for the loss of humanity and deploring senseless killing and fanaticism. Germany, as Usselman noted, "will not begrudge the loss of such significant paintings, but will celebrate that which makes us understand and reach out to one another: a shared sense of what it is to be human" (4).

CHAPTER VII

REFLECTIONS ON THE IMPORTANCE OF THE CYCLE

Gerhard Storck, the owner of the second gallery to show the cycle, writing for the catalog that went with the first exhibition, anticipated what history might say about Richter's *October 18, 1977*. Storck wrote that the paintings showed the most mundane moments in a fairly realistic way, however he insisted that the paintings did not show reality.

“The paintings call the people up into memory while making them untouchable . . . Our minds, our understanding, our feelings are taken prisoner by either the form or content, and there is an attempt to come closer in order to fully grasp them, which makes it clear that with the cycle a new quality of painting has been demanded. I do not know how to say that painting has never before shown everything in such a way, like that which speaks from these pictures“ (*Catalog 18*) (Trans. G. Cope).

Richter has given many reasons for painting *October 18, 1977*: That as an outsider he could deal best with the uncomfortable subject matter; there was unfinished business, for him and for the people of Germany; the veil of silence that had covered the subject for a decade was not healthy for the German psyche; and the resurgence of interest in the gang should be balanced. As he got older, Richter opened up about how personal the art was for him. By painting the cycle, Richter was coming to terms with what it meant to him to be a German. But there may well have been something more. He was a product of a more traditional art education and was aware of the hierarchy of the

various forms of art. At an earlier time, history painting was ranked as the highest tier of art. At the moment when he had become a highly recognized, successful artist, Richter turned to history. He had lived through this history and it haunted him. But it also could elevate him to a place among the greatest artists.

Landi (93) notes that the French Academy in the seventeenth century ranked history as the most important and serious branch of painting. History was superior to still life, portraiture, and landscape, which also were popular forms at the time. Glorious and grand scenes from mythology or actual historic events won honors. Examples included Jacques-Louis David's *Oath of the Horatti* (1784), as well as David's painting of the *Coronation of Napoleon* (1807) and Emanuel Gottlieb Leutze's painting of *Washington Crossing the Delaware* (1851). These and other history paintings made big statements in grandiose terms. According to Landi, the first artist to paint a current event that would become a historic painting was David, with his work the *Death of Marat* in 1793. This use of topical subject matter was followed in the next century by Goya's *Third of May 1808* (1814) and Gericault's *Raft of Medusa* (1818-19), as well as Manet's *Execution of the Emperor Maximillian*. Landi goes on, "Picasso's *Guernica* (1937), a mammoth indictment of the Franco regime, brought home the horrors of war on a heroic scale and in a new vocabulary. It was history painting at its most scornful and savage, a complete upending of the lofty aspirations of the Academy" (93).

Picasso with *Guernica* and Richter with *October 18, 1977* created new art forms for expressing the horrors of rebellion and suppression, and in these forms new ways of

seeing history. Landi also notes that even though photography has eclipsed the relevance of history painting, there are artists "who have the big ambition to address in major artistic statements about important things that are happening in the world" (93).

History painting has more of a legacy in Europe, and that may have influenced Richter. His personal history is linked to the most traumatic era of European and German history—his family's life disrupted by World War II, living under the Nazis and then growing up under communism, his escape to the west, only to have life there unhinged by the constant eruptions of terrorism from the Baader-Meinhof Gang. His life followed the outline of German history. His hatred of extremes was understandable and well justified. He found nothing beneficial in any of them.

In his conversation with Jan Thorn-Prikker, Richter makes it clear that he was addressing history when he painted the RAF. He felt that the cycle could bring new insights, and even provide meaning to the events, or console the country in its grief or attempts to come to terms with the events. "It's also about the fact that we can't simply discard and forget a story like that; we must try to find a different way of dealing with it—appropriately" (*Writings* 232). Landi felt that this view of the cycle's purpose was a very ambitious undertaking.

One more factor may offer some insight into the timing of Richter's oil paintings. About the time he picked up his brushes to paint the photographs that he had been collecting for years, there was a resurgence of interest in the RAF. A decade had passed since the dramatic suicides. Aust's biography, the *Baader Meinhof Complex* was

published in 1985. The book covered the group and its history in great detail, setting off a new round of discussions about what they represented. The media, too, were revisiting the gang and especially the remaining unsolved cases. And it would soon be time for the remaining prisoners to be released. Richter hoped his paintings would bring a strong, measured, and balanced approach to these discussions.

In 1998 the remaining members of the RAF released a statement that they were disbanding, that their cause was history. Only about ten people were still active in the group. Most of the others had been assimilated back into society, leading relatively “normal” lives. Some had died trying to release imprisoned members, and nine people were still in prison. At least five cases ascribed to the gang remain unsolved (Cowell 9). But the end of the gang was far from the end of interest in them that aroused strong feelings and controversy.

In 2003 plans were discussed for an exhibit to be called *The RAF, the Myth*. The *Economist* reported that neither conservatives nor liberals favored the exhibit:

In an early outline of the plans for the exhibit there was a question being considered as to which of the RAF’s “ideas and ideals” still might have some meaning for today. Many considered it to be propaganda for the group and an attempt to mythologize them. Their machine gun-and-star logo is already popular on designer t-shirts. Both left and right have united on one point—they do not want to discuss the RAF at all. Conservatives say it would be honoring criminals. Liberals say that many of their members might have been sympathizers who do not want to be reminded of their murky past associations. For example, Otto Schily, who was the lawyer defending the RAF in trials, had become Germany’s interior minister. He has let it be known that he is not in favor of an exhibit on the RAF. (3)

Aust's book was made into a movie released in 2008. It received much of the same criticism from both sides of the controversy as did Richter's cycle. Aust had known and worked for Ulrike Meinhof before she became involved with the group that would bear her name for all time. The director of the film, Uli Edel, had been in university at the time of the gang's activities, which he and his friends had read about and discussed. At the time, young people saw the actions of the gang in contrast to their parents' passivity during the Hitler regime. When the group became violent, robbing banks and kidnapping people, sympathy dried up. When the film was shown, many people perceived that it made the RAF too attractive and that it romanticized their actions. But some new sympathizers objected that the film made their mythologized heroes look like losers. The truth is that the members of the RAF were charismatic, attractive people who were also losers. Family members of the victims were outraged that the film showed their relatives' deaths in dramatic detail. Michael Buback complained that victims' families were not informed about specific scenes shown in the film which could upset them. Buback discovered when he saw the film that it included the murder of his father. Siegfried Buback, who had been killed by the RAF group in 1977. Siegfried Buback was the chief federal prosecutor for Germany at the time of his murder. The movie scene shows a terrorist who had pretending to be a nanny taking a walk with a baby carriage crossing a Cologne street. As Buback's car approached the intersection, the woman pulls out a gun from the carriage, and shoots the driver, the prosecutor as well as the bodyguards. "It is cruel that little consideration has been shown towards the family members. We feel we're

playing the victim all over again," Buback's son said (Connolly). Another family member of one of the RAF victims, Jörg Schleyer, complained that it was "painful" to watch the scenes where his father was murdered. However he felt that the film was honest in showing the RAF as a "wantonly brutal band of murderers . . . without damaging the memory of the victims" (Connolly).

In addition to the books, film, and many articles that were released, there are blogs and websites dedicated to the subject, and one can even buy reproductions of memorabilia associated with the group. T-shirts with the RAF logo can be found at Café Press (www.cafepress.com), and Zazzle (www.zazzle.com) websites. Café Press also offered the same logo on everything from a Nook e-book reader cover to a gym bag, a can cooler, and a thermos bottle. The www.baader-meinhof.com site has a shop which offers two reproductions of the wanted posters that were seen in Germany during the active time of the group and a bumper sticker declaring in German that you are not a member of the Baader-Meinhof Gang. Some of the websites purport to be neutral and unbiased, while others are admiring. Fashion items described as "**terrorist chic**" include "Prada Meinhof" T-shirts and handbags with the group's logo showing a Heckler and Koch machine gun. All of this commercialization of the Baader/Meinhof group's image shows a lack of understanding of their actions and the consequences for them, their victims and their families, and for the society as a whole. Putting them on the level of pop icon portrays them as heroic, which is untrue, and uses a painful subject in a crass and venal way to make money.

The wisdom in Richter's way of presenting the terrorists becomes clearer when the mourning his paintings evoke is contrasted with this almost carnival treatment of terrorist symbol as couture. His intuition about what to paint, how to paint it, and when to paint it was spot-on. His work contributed to the discussion and the remembrance. In its raw honesty it gave balance as well as meaning. To the extent that these paintings remain the definitive artistic work about an era, Richter has painted history in a grand style and has given future artists an example for how to deal with complicated and difficult issues for future eras.

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Appendix

Dead (plates 1, 2, 3).

Plate 1 62 x 67 cm, oil on canvas

Plate 2 62 X 62 cm, oil on canvas

Plate 3 35 x 40 cm, oil on canvas

Hanged (plate 4)

Plate 4 200 x 140 cm, oil on canvas

Man Shot Down (plates 5, 6)

Plate 5 100 x 140 cm

Plate 6 100 x 140 cm, oil on canvas

Cell (plate 7)

Plate 7 200 x 140 cm, oil on canvas

Confrontation 1, 2, 3 (plates 8, 9, and 10)

Plate 8 112 x 102 cm, oil on canvas

Plate 9 112 x 102 cm, oil on canvas

Plate 10 112 x 102 cm, oil on canvas

Youth Portrait (plate 11)

Plate 11 67 x 62 cm, oil on canvas

Record Player (Plate 12)

Plate 12 62 x 83 cm, oil on canvas

Funeral (plates 13)

Plate 13 200 x 320 cm, oil on canvas

Arrest (plates 14, 15)

Plate 14 92 x 126 cm, oil on canvas

Plate 15 92 x 126 cm, oil on canvas





