

“Wir wollen uns mit den Bildern unseres Landes befassen”:^{*}
Documents, Fetishes, Icons, Relics: the Reconstruction
of the German Autumn as an Image

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Abstract

In *18. Oktober 1977* – a cycle of fifteen paintings about the German Autumn and the Baader-Meinhof Gang – Gerhard Richter deals with the trauma of terrorism confronting himself with the crystallized memory of the “crime scene” – specifically, the photos of the dead bodies in Stammheim taken by the police and then published in *Stern* – that he recomposes, giving us back an experience of blurred, vague, enigmatic vision, therefore forcing us to look in a different way and to *search* for what is hiding from our sight.

The work of Richter is a gesture of rewriting archival images that thus becomes an act of redemption. He opposes to the obscene visibility of the death showed in the photographs of the police – exhibited as proofs of guilt or exploited to satisfy a desire of revenge – the spectral vision of an elementary truth: death, even in the exceptional form of terroristic violence, represents a mysterious and utter horizon that no political gesture can recompose. It is exactly in the death, experienced as a common but unspeakable fate, that Richter finds the humanity of the terrorists, helping us to approach the comprehension of trauma.

So-called “memorial-photography,” which was popular in the United States in the nineteenth century, saw not life but death as the only motivation for capturing a person in a picture. We shy away from looking death in the face, so we mask its visage with an image of life. A dead person in a picture seems to us doubly dead.

Hans Belting, *An Anthropology of Images*

18. Oktober 1977 is the title of a very well-known work by Gerhard Richter, realized in 1988 and now part of the MoMA collections in New York.¹ The

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^{*} “We want to concern ourselves with the images of our country.” This is the statement expressed

work consists of a series of fifteen paintings of different sizes devoted to the Baader-Meinhof Gang – the group of terrorists belonging to the RAF (*Rote Armee Fraktion*) whose “urban guerrilla” actions dramatically marked the Federal Republic of Germany in the 1970s. In its referential neutrality, the title takes the viewer back to a specific historical context, to a day and a chain of events which are still very vivid in the German collective memory. This is the day in which Andreas Baader, Gudrun Ensslin and Jan-Carl Raspe died in the top security prison of Stammheim, near Stuttgart. The dead bodies of the three RAF members were found just a few hours after the special troops of German police assaulted the Lufthansa airplane hijacked to Mogadishu by a group of Palestinian terrorists, who were claiming the liberation of their imprisoned German comrades. In turn, the assault – in which all the hijackers died, except for one woman, and that finally brought the release of all the hostages – preceded the execution of Hanns-Martin Schleyer, who was kidnapped in September by a commando of the Rote Armee Fraktion and whose body was found on October 19 in the trunk of a car in Mulhouse. Also Schleyer, who was the President of the *Bundesverband Deutschen Industrie* (the German Employers’ Association) and head of the Daimler-Benz corporation, had been kidnapped to negotiate the release of the three RAF members.

Amidst this dramatic sequence of shocks, with its fatal twist of actions and reactions, where victims and executioners seemed to continually change roles, it is the alleged collective suicide in Stammheim which raises the most passionate reactions: the suspicion that a “state murder” has been committed seems to resurrect the ghost of Nazism, the traumatic unconscious of a “past that never passes away,” as the police state-like practices of the federal government seem to prove.²

by the filmmakers involved in the collective film *Deutschland im Herbst* (*Germany in Autumn*, Fassbinder, Kluge, Reitz, Schlöndorff, Brustellin et al., 1978), shot after the events of October 1977; in Petra Kraus (ed.), 1977-1997. *Deutschland im Herbst. Terrorismus im Film*, Filmzentrum, München 1997, p. 80.

¹ Exhibited for the first time in 1989 at the Museum Haus Esters in Krefeld, during the same year *18. Oktober 1977* was presented in Frankfurt, in London and in Rotterdam. The next year the whole series was exhibited in the USA and in Canada, before it was entrusted to the Museum für Moderne Kunst in Frankfurt on a long-term loan, and it remained there until 2000. Right from the beginning Richter imposed some constraints: the work should not be split; furthermore, the whole series must be displayed only in museums, not in private art galleries. In 1995 he decided to sell it to MoMA in New York. This decision caused a controversy: Richter was accused of selling a part of German history. The *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* reported that the paintings represented the trauma of a still unresolved period of history and Richter, by selling them, removed a critical focus for the continued ideological struggle over German history and its memory (Eduard Beaucamp, “Exportiertes Trauma,” in *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 8 June 1995, p. 35). However, the decision to move *18. Oktober 1977* far from Germany and its ghosts is Richter’s deliberate action: it expresses the will for a change of perspective, the attempt to escape an only historical and political interpretation of his work.

² On the morning of 18 October, Gudrun Ensslin was found hanging from the bars of her cell’s window, while Baader and Raspe lay on the floor of their own cells, in a pool of blood, each with a gunshot in the head. It was alleged that Baader had shot himself in the back of his neck (three cartridge cases were found in his cell), while Raspe had used a 9-caliber gun. These circumstances,

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Fig. 1 – Gerhard Richter at work for *18. Oktober 1977* (1988).

In the paroxysm of those days, a whole season of clashes and conflicts between state and terrorists seems to emerge. At the same time, though, an even more distant, but still painful and never healed, collective wound seems to re-open. In fact, the increasingly violent actions of the RAF find a counterpart in the authoritarian and repressive reaction of the institutions, which as early as 1968 had introduced measures and special laws as well as exceptional actions of prevention and control, thus fuelling a fear connected both to terrorists' actions and to the operations of the police.³ The concern that democratic rights and individual

along with the quite unlikely presence of weapons in a maximum security prison have since then instilled many doubts and suspicions in the left-wing as well as in the moderate public opinion. In his now classic biography on the Baader-Meinhof Group, Stefan Aust suggests that it was a “co-ordinated” suicide, a political gesture of attack rather than surrender to the state. See Stefan Aust, *Der Baader-Meinhof Komplex*, Hoffmann & Campe Verlag, Hamburg 1985 (2008).

³ The emergency laws of 1968 represent a reply to the protests of youths' movements and to the struggles against the Vietnam war and “capitalist imperialism.” In 1972 the *Extremistenbeschluss* was launched, which prevented people suspected of sympathizing with the extreme left to access public employment; in 1974 the laws on anti-terrorism allowed the police to search, keep tabs, bug the telephones, and more generally to look into the private lives of German citizens. This strong reaction of the institutions, which struck also the “sympathizers” and involved from the beginning the police and military apparatus, solicits, due to its lack of proportions, a comparison with Nazi practices. As is known, the truest core of young people's protests in Germany is represented mainly by the historical-generational struggle. See Thomas Elsaesser, *German Cinema: Terror and Trauma: Cultural Memory since 1945*, Routledge, New York-Abingdon 2014, p. 122. The bibliography on the German Years of Lead is endless. Besides the study of Stefan Aust, the main texts used in this section are Margit Meyer, “The German October of 1977,” in *New German Critique*, no. 13, Winter 1978, pp. 155-163; Wolfgang Kraushaar (ed.), *Die RAF und die*

freedom were in danger in the name of the State's own security dramatically increased; moreover, the threat that a real "emergency dictatorship" could be established – that is, a dictatorship not only based on control and supervision, but also supported by approval from the frightened majority of the population – forced the public opinion to judge the RAF "as an understandable if not justifiable, traumatized (over)reaction to the official Germany's lingering and latent Nazi legacy."⁴

This feeling of distrust and enduring emergency, a sort of defensive withdrawal tinged with paranoia, is well-suited to describe the "German collective malady," the block of a country hanging between repression and an excess of memory: a "country unable to mourn,"⁵ prisoner of its own history whilst trying to escape it. As Miriam Hansen suggests,

the catastrophic concatenation of events provoked other reactions besides the aggravation of prevailing tendencies; it seems to have lifted, for a moment at least, the veil of historical amnesia which had protected the growth of German self-confidence since the early 1950s. Associations of the current events with "war," or "1945," were widespread, confirming [...] the observation that such a moment of shock briefly illuminated the falsely integrated elements of German history as a fundamentally impossible relationship. It was the historicity of the whole situation – not only of the officially chronicled events of Mogadishu and Schleyer's death – that was perceived before all analysis. Confusion, along with feelings of grief, despair, powerlessness, overwhelmingly struck intellectuals from left to liberal.⁶

It is into this setting, where time is experienced as catastrophe and where present and past collapse and trade their own meanings, that Gerhard Richter comes back eleven years later. In its pure evidence as a 'fact,' *18. Oktober 1977* suggests an historical order and represents an act of memory as well as a return to the past. However, this process has nothing to do with historical painting and its commemorative or celebratory intent – from whose rhetoric Richter seeks to distance himself, –⁷ nor is it an example of political art. Richter's anti-ideological standing, as well as his hostility towards political dogmas and faiths, are well-known.⁸ Furthermore, the fact that his work has been

Medien, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt a.M. 2008.

⁴ Thomas Elsasesser, *German Cinema*, cit., p. 120.

⁵ This formula is taken from the title of a now classic study on repression mechanisms in the Germany of the second postwar period: Alexander and Margarethe Mitscherlich, *Die Unfähigkeit zu trauern. Grundlagen kollektiven Verhaltens*, Piper Verlag, München 1967.

⁶ Miriam Hansen, "Cooperative Auteur Cinema and Oppositional Public Sphere: Alexander Kluge's contribution to *Germany in Autumn*," in *New German Critique*, no. 24-25, Fall-Winter 1981-82, p. 44.

⁷ On the rejection of celebratory art see: Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, "Divided Memory and Post-Traditional Identity. Gerhard Richter's Work of Mourning," in *October*, no. 75, Winter 1996, pp. 61-82.

⁸ The attack on ideology as a faith in a universal truth is one of the most important themes for Richter as a painter who grew up in the DDR. See Gerhard Richter, *Notes, 1988*, in Dietmar Elger,

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realized several years after the historical events took place is it itself an act of distancing, as it shifts the attention from the militant action to more general considerations which transcend the historical details of the events portrayed. Since the first presentation of the *Oktober* cycle, Richter has underlined the “purely human”⁹ urgency behind it, the “speechless emotion [...] 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).”¹⁰ “Dismay, pity, grief”¹¹ establish the horizon of the sorrow and explain the need for a return and a farewell, now finally possible after many years. Yet in this tragedy, in its specific determination, Richter discovers a more general condition which becomes the truest centre of his work: the fatal bond of hope and failure, courage and cruelty, faith and violence which marks the actions as well as the course of history and the sense of the self getting lost within an ideology, in the collective dream of a change and its tragic re-emergence in death.

*The tremendous strength, the terrifying power that an idea has, which goes as far as death. That is the most impressive thing, to me, and the most inexplicable thing; that we produce ideas, which are almost always not only utterly wrong and nonsensical but above all dangerous. Wars of religion and the rest: it's fundamentally all about nothing, about pure blather – and we take it utterly seriously, fanatically, even unto death.*¹²

This sense of history as a senseless, cruel order is depicted in *18. Oktober 1977* starting from a series of concrete details, as in a brutal photographic recording of the events. The starting point for Richter's reconstruction is once again the pure factuality of a datum, as the extremely simple title which indicates a day – at the same time exceptional and ordinary – shows.

In the introductory notes for the first exhibition in Krefeld, in 1989, Richter uses these words to illustrate his work:

What I have 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 pop stars). Then a big, unspecified burial – a cell dominated by a bookcase – a silent, grey, 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, grey, mostly very blurred, diffuse. Their presence is the horror and the hard-to-bear refusal to answer, to explain, to give an opinion. I'm not sure whether the pictures “ask” anything; they provoke contradiction through their hopelessness and desolation, their lack of parti-

Hans Ulrich Obrist (eds.), *Gerhard Richter: Writings 1961-2007*, D.A.P., New York 2009, p. 200.

⁹ Gerhard Richter, *Notes*, 1989, *ivi*, p. 213.

¹⁰ Gerhard Richter, *Notes for a Press Conference, November-December 1988*, *ivi*, p. 202.

¹¹ Gerhard Richter, *Notes*, 1989, *cit.*, p. 213.

¹² *Conversation with Jan Thorn Prikker on 18. Oktober 1977*, in Benjamin H.D. Buchloch et al. (eds), *Gerhard Richter: Atlas: The Reader*, Whitechapel Gallery, London 2012, pp. 20-21.

sanship.¹³

Although only half of the paintings show the dead terrorists, death is *the* central theme of the whole cycle and it defines its tone: that is, a general sense of failure and loss. The dead bodies painted by Richter not only represent the defeat of an idea, they also give evidence of its tragic foolishness.

The paintings showing the dead bodies of Ensslin and Baader – *Erhängte* (*Hanged*), *Erschlossene 1-2* (*Man Shot Down 1-2*) – are based on the photographs taken by the police in Stammheim when the bodies were found. The photos were published in *Stern* in October 1980.¹⁴ The issue of 16 June 1976 of the same magazine contained the photos of Meinhof, who had hanged herself in Stammheim on 9 May of the same year.¹⁵ These shocking photos function as a blueprint for the three pictures titled *Tote* (*Dead Person*), another “neutral,” coldly objective title, as in the case of the other paintings in the series.¹⁶

If death has always been the object of artistic representation and the analogy between death and image is as old as the power of representation, the model Richter refers to and adopts in every detail is the cruel and pitiless gaze on the “crime scene.” However, if “the photograph provokes horror, [...] the painting – with the same motif – something more like grief,”¹⁷ and doing so it radically alters our visual experience. As we will see in a moment, it is on the very thin boundary between obscenity and revelation that Richter sets his gaze as well as ours, giving to that specific vision of death the form of a farewell, showing “how the aesthetic form of a memorial work amounts to a strategy of forgetting.”¹⁸

We shall start from here: it is in the desire to *re-animate*, at once and at the same time, the body and the image that we can find our way.

Finding the image

¹³ Gerhard Richter, *Notes*, 1988, cit., pp. 203-204. This list includes four paintings subsequently removed from the cycle. Among them, there is the painting which portrays the dead body of Holger Meins, who died in prison after a hunger strike in 1974.

¹⁴ The photos were published after the investigations on the death of the three terrorists were reopened. See “Der Fall Stammheim,” in *Stern*, 30 October 1980, pp. 24-25.

¹⁵ The title summarizes in a symbolic date a series of events connected with the Baader-Meinhof Gang; those events occurred during many years: for example, the arrest of Baader and Meins on 1 June 1972, after a gunfire, or the suicide of Meinhof a year before. There is even a portrait of a young Meinhof, derived from a agency photo.

¹⁶ Each painting has a title: *Jugendbildnis* (*Youth Portrait*); three canvases bearing the title *Tote* (*Dead Persons*); *Erhängte* (*Hanged*); *Gegenüberstellung 1-2-3* (*Confrontation 1-2-3*); *Erschlossene 1-2* (*Man Shot Down 1-2*); *Zelle* (*Cell*); *Plattenspieler* (*Record Player*); *Festnahme 1-2* (*Arrest 1-2*); *Beerdigung* (*Burial*).

¹⁷ *Conversation with Jan Thorn Prikker* on 18. Oktober 1977, in Dietmar Elger, Hans Ulrich Obrist (eds.), *Gerhard Richter*, cit., p. 229.

¹⁸ Gerhard Storck, *Obne Titel* (*Gemischte Gefühle*), in *Gerhard Richter*: 18. Oktober 1977, Walther König, Köln 1989, p. 13.

The paintings included in *Oktober* are all *Fotobilder*: each painting is obtained from a photographic model.¹⁹ For years, Richter had been collecting a large amount of photographs on the Baader-Meinhof Gang: these were documentary photographs, including press photographs and pictures taken by the police. Private photos, taken from family albums, went hand in hand with the public images portraying the operations carried out by members of the RAF as well as with mug shots and rogues' galleries. Richter's examination of the photographs, mainly from newspapers' archives, is reflected in *Atlas* (sheets 470-479) – the vast work archive in which Richter has stored and organized all the materials he used –²⁰ and in a separate study album. He collected more than one hundred pictures related to the RAF in these two albums.

It is not merely an attempt at philological recovery nor an act of compulsive accumulation; this gesture, which is very frequent in contemporary art, is rather aimed at searching and reinterpreting existing materials. Here the action of archiving is very close to the Foucauldian idea of an “archaeology of the present.” It resembles the order of a promise, rather than that of a return. Richter is interested in the presence of a ghost, in investigating our relationship with a “way of seeing,” which is at the root of our gaze.

As Benjamin Buchloh writes, Richter “seems to consider photography and its various practices as a system of ideological domination, and more precisely, as one of the instruments with which collective anomie, amnesia and repression are socially inscribed.”²¹ It is after all the very ambiguous quality of the photographic image, which at the same time presents itself as a trace of documentary truth and ideological falsity, to define its testimonial value.

To Richter, photography is also a sort of figurative *ready-made* which gives him the chance of not losing the immediacy of what it represents as well as the opportunity of gaining a ‘neutrality’ of the gaze warranted by the obliteration of any expression of boasted artistry. For Richter, photography – in its most common, banal and mechanical form, such as the pictures contained in a family album or in a newspaper – is, literally, “almost nature,”²² a “pure” image,

¹⁹ “I’m not trying to imitate a photograph; I’m trying to make one”: Gerhard Richter, *Extracts from Writings and Interviews 1962-2003*, in Benjamin H.D. Buchloh et al. (eds.), *Gerhard Richter: Atlas: The Reader*, cit., p. 14.

²⁰ The *Atlas* is a vast work in progress started in 1962 as a simple collection of iconographic material, including amateur photos, images taken from newspapers and magazines, advertisements, sketches and drawings; it is a sort of inventory of models that Richter collects for his pictorial activity. Since then the collection has evolved in an organic archive, revolving around themes and motives, which aims at accounting specific visual forms. This image-diary covering fifty years of activity is also a real cartography of the visual culture of an age. A sort of mix between collection and work, the *Atlas* is a huge archive of “visions” that, since 1972, has been exhibited all over the world following a spatial organisation rigorously decided by Richter himself. On the *Atlas* see Benjamin H.D. Buchloh et al. (eds.), *Gerhard Richter: Atlas: The Reader*, cit.

²¹ Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, *Gerhard Richter's Atlas: The Anomic Archive*, *ivi*, p. 96.

²² *Conversation with Jan Thorn Prikker on 18. Oktober 1977*, cit., p. 228.

immediate, free from any formal rules or figurative tradition, able to reveal the *appearance* of the world. This “communal vision” is the evidence of a “way of seeing”: a shared, albeit obliviously, perceptive system. A primeval way of transcribing the past as well as a testimonial trace of the gaze, the photograph works as a document not only because it preserves a content, but also due to the form through which it describes the world. In the *Fotobilder*, Richter re-appropriates the immediacy associated with photography while exploring its modes of representation: and it is in the search of the *pure appearance* inside representation that he reveals “the image as image,” thus showing how vision may be the expression of a dominant cultural order, a device for constructing the visibility of the world.

For the *Oktober* cycle, Richter had to deal with the common and shared image of terrorism, with the memory of the RAF built by images. It is therefore a confrontation with the *representation* of terrorists created by media over the years, a representation that the terrorists themselves have contributed to build up. The history of the RAF – as has been highlighted – is also the history of the images that the group has enacted, arranged and left behind.²³ The Baader-Meinhof Gang – a media phenomenon not only because of the interest of the press and television in presiding over public comprehension – operates in perfect awareness of the weight of its own image. The terrorists of the RAF very consciously evaluated media impact and exploited it in order to promote their actions. Indeed, they had grown up in the culture of the happening, of the avant-garde street theatre, of Fluxus performances and Situationist *dérives*, all forms that encouraged the insurrectionary and subversive use of images.²⁴ It was also on account of this communicative ability that the State and the police apparatus tried to control the RAF’s public image, both through the complicity of tabloids and the conservative press, which organized whispering campaigns and resorted to every kind of manipulation and shock, underscoring the violence of the terrorists through the use of violent images, particularly through an overexposure of the images of the criminals.

²³ See Astrid Proll, *Hans und Grete. Bilder der RAF 1967-1977*, Steidl, Göttingen 1998. Elsaesser explains how the Baader-Meinhof Gang practices remind to the contemporary idea of terrorism as a “war of image,” an idea which comes both from *images of martyrs*. Indeed, the terrorists showed great expertise in promoting themselves as victims during the detention; their condition was presented as akin to that of the prisoners of concentration camps, as if to underline a manifest continuity with Nazi practices. The hunger strikes and the suicide as political gestures confirm this kind of image. They were also images of *an extremely vital avant-garde*. The bank robberies, the police pursuits, the fast cars, the transgressions, the sexual freedom and the glamorous clothes all contribute to foster an imagination of youth and anarchism, a cool frame of outlaw eroticism that the cinema itself contributed to reinforce, in a sort of “mediatic circle.” “In a genealogy of terrorism as a ‘war of image,’ [...] the RAF can claim a well-deserved place – but so can its opponents. Taking ‘propaganda by deed’ to a new level, the RAF exploited the ‘society of the spectacle’ for their own ends, to the point where the images they produced or gave rise to, became the main objectives of their actions, with the actual victims the collateral but necessary props for a successful staging.” Thomas Elsaesser, *German Cinema*, cit., p. 123.

²⁴ *Ibidem*.

The mug shots of the *Anarchistische Gewalttäter* (Anarchist Violent Criminals) appeared in every corner of the state, and the Wanted posters – which offered a reward for any report – were displayed in every post-office as well as in shop windows. Particularly the mug shots, which were extensively exhibited in the public space, operate as a device of identification, as they epitomize the commonplace image of guilt while regulating the identification of the criminal as a criminal, according to a scheme both of depersonalization and overdetermination.

In the case of the RAF, a reality predominantly without images was being overcompensated by a media-driven image-world, that [...] counted, above all, on the shock-and-outrage factor of a preconditioned public sphere. [...] The RAF was strategically conquered and lastingly occupied through its images. It was this appropriation of a language of images by very diverse (partly state) powers that has shaped today's over all perception of the RAF phenomenon.²⁵

Significantly, after the leaders of the RAF were arrested, the publication of their declarations and the images of the prisoners were banned, according to a strategy which seems not only to reinforce the isolation and the “sensory deprivation” of identity brought about by the detention, but also, in a more banal way, to prevent the promotion of terrorists as victims or martyrs of the system. It is not by chance that – as a form of political counter-information – the *Stammbeimer* prepared a volume that also contains the self-shots taken with a Minox minicam secretly smuggled into the prison.²⁶ On the one hand these photographs, which show the terrorist alive and smiling despite the many hunger strikes, are another demonstration of their ability to act in spite of the prohibition, while on the other they suggest an act of re-appropriation of their own images (paradoxically, this occurred a few months before the terrorists’ deaths, which have been interpreted as a gesture of re-appropriation of their own bodies).

As Richter says, “there is nothing private or individual about the RAF members; they are no more than the sensational public image that the media created of them.”²⁷

Hence, starting from the *reality* of these images and depending on their being established as a common mnemonic horizon, Richter builds up his rereading, with the aim to reconfigure its meaning, but also to redefine the limits and the possibilities of representation and of our vision.

The photographic matrix of the paintings that compose the *Oktober* cycle is acknowledged not only in the choice of black, white and grey as the only chromatic elements, but also in the faithful reproduction of the same compositional order

²⁵ Wolfgang Kraushaar, “Zwischen Popkultur, Politik und Zeitgeschichte,” cit., *ivi*, pp. 127-128.

²⁶ The fact is analysed by Heiko Reusch, *Zur Vorstellung des Terroristen*, Tectum Verlag, Marburg 2008, pp. 24-27. The volume of the RAF, published before the German Autumn, is Rote Armeefraktion, *Texte: der RAF*, Verlag Bo Cavefors, Malmö 1977.

²⁷ Gerhard Richter, *The Daily Practice of Painting*, cit. in Frances Guerin, Roger Hallas (eds.), *The Image and the Witness: Trauma, Memory and Visual Culture*, Wallflower Press, London-New York 2007, p. 121.

used in the press images: points of view, centres of focalization and different types of framing. At the same time, ‘full evidence’ of the photographs is denied through various forms of perceptive alteration. The shadings, *flous*, and large sections of grey that cover broad parts of the paintings actually make some of the figures difficult to detect. Hence this painting style aimed at “the detriment of the image or, at least, at the detriment of the object described”²⁸ hinders the very act of interpretation, for it forces us to look in a different way and grabs, as it were, the subjects portrayed away from our sight. Thus a distance is created which restores “une intimité aux personnes dépeintes et une universalité au thème primordial du cycle.”²⁹

The process of veiling the scenes is progressive and inversely proportional to our desire for looking. *Tote*, for example, shows three different versions of the same image portraying the dead body of Meinhof. The photo, published in *Stern*, shows a close up of half of the woman’s face. The head, slightly reclined, is framed by short dark hair, which contrasts with the paleness of her face. The neck is marked by a clear black line: a deep wound, with no blood. The mouth is open; the eyes, half-closed, suggest the sense of a sudden meeting with death. The tension that can be perceived in her face and the position of her body, lying on a plain surface, remind us of a corpse placed on a dissecting table. Indeed, what this photograph seems to convey is nothing but the brutal recording of a death; in this, it is similar to a medical report. However, the three paintings that Richter creates starting from this model differ in size, arrangement of the subject portrayed and intensity of the blurring. The smaller the paintings, the more the human figure looks distant;³⁰ the position of the head is slightly different in each of the three paintings; and the background gets darker and darker. As a result, the figures become more and more blurred: while in the first painting the features of Meinhof’s face are still recognisable, in the last one they are so blurred that they look totally vague and indistinct. The gradual disappearing of the subject, its transformation into a pure shadow, on the one hand suggests the sense of a loss connected to death, but on the other hand it drives us away from the facts in the direction of an “indistinct” and universal dimension of suffering for such a cruel death. From painting to painting then, Richter “also smoothes out the texture of her face and neck and darkens the background, thereby blurring the dividing line between life and death.”³¹ It is on this vague borderline between life and death that our sight vacillates, challenged by a deep sense of mystery and annihilation. Of the original photograph, with its claim of asserting a ‘fact’ in a shameless and objective way, only a spectral trace remains: the

²⁸ Interview with Robert Storr, 2001, in *Gerhard Richter la pratica quotidiana della pittura, 1962-2001*, cit., p. 223.

²⁹ Achim Borchardt-Hume, “Dreh dich nicht um.” *Ne te retourne pas. Les peintures de Richter de la fin des années 1980*, in Mark Godfrey et al. (eds.), *Gerhard Richter. Panorama. Rétrospective*, Edition du Centre Pompidou, Paris 2012, p. 167.

³⁰ The size of the paintings is following the order of their exhibition: 62 cm. x 67 cm.; 62 cm. x 62 cm.; 35 cm. x 40 cm.

³¹ Kaja Silverman, *Flesh of My Flesh*, Stanford University Press, Stanford 2009, p. 194.

painting destabilizes the experience of vision, giving us back not the truth, but a standpoint for further research. This experience involves both the viewer, who is denied an unequivocal vision, and the artist, whose work may only consist in a series of attempts, of figural approximations, as the repetitions of the same image show. After all, “by means of the blurring of his paintings, he breaks down the symbiosis of reality and the past that exists in the photographs.”³² Death, first recorded as the administrative banality of a public event in the photographs of the police and then exhibited as a sort of spectacle in the press, in the *Fotobilder* finds again a dimension of blind and opaque effectiveness: a dimension of inscrutable mystery.

In *Erhängte*, the body of Ensslin hanging from the bars of her cell’s window is almost invisible, placed as it is in a protected space, hidden in the grey background, and surrounded by a white, phantasmal light. Paradoxically, only from a certain distance we can perceive her profile and distinguish it in the web of screens and veils created by Richter (a cloth hanging on the left side similar to a big black stain, the grid structure of the bars from which the body is hanging, the hair that covers her face...). The image seems to melt, it literally ‘dissolves,’ denying us the possibility of violating the space of death. “Richter recoups Ensslin’s ‘privacy’ when he safely sequesters the corpse behind the surface of the brushstroke, the blurred surface of the image.”³³ If the photograph taken by the police works as a “proof of the crime,” Richter’s painting prevents us from identifying the body, assigning to the image the function of a cover, as if it could return a denied dignity to it. To the public exhibition of the dead body – an exhibition which satisfies a fantasy of hate and revenge,³⁴ or just a voyeuristic pleasure – the painting opposes the intrinsic impossibility to show death. Exposed in its tragic brutality, through the evident solitude of its subject, the vision of that body – a body with no comfort, lost in a desolate space – causes a feeling of compassion for that tragic end.

The threshold between the visible and the invisible also corresponds to the separation between public and private sphere, a separation that the terrorists, by choosing a political struggle, resolutely denied. It is exactly the connection of public and private, of life and History, that seems obscure and fatal to Richter: “the public posture of these people: nothing private, but the overriding, ideological motivation.”³⁵ By ‘obscuring’ the public vision of their deaths, this division is restored and preserved in the paintings. After all, it is the elementary truth of death, not only as an experience that denies any chance of communion and is impossible to express but also as an event in which the subject (re)joins

³² Armin Zweite, *Gerhard Richter’s Album of Photographs, Collages and Sketches*, in Benjamin H.D. Buchloh et al. (eds.), *Gerhard Richter: Atlas: The Reader*, cit., p. 56.

³³ Frances Guerin, *The Grey Space Between: Gerhard Richter’s* 18.Oktober 1977, in Frances Guerin, Roger Hallas (eds.), *The Image and the Witness*, cit., p. 118.

³⁴ On the paintings of Richter as transposition of a “fantasy of hate” see *Conversation with Jan Thorn Prikker* on 18.Oktober 1977, cit., pp. 20-22. About iconization and exposure of the “body of the enemy” see Giovanni De Luna, *Il corpo del nemico ucciso*, Einaudi, Torino 2006.

³⁵ *Ibidem*.

himself and his own history, which gives the *terrorists* their original quality as *human beings*. What Richter represents is a sort of paradoxical *redemption*: finding in death the common horizon of every existence, one that no political gesture can tame, Richter identifies in the dead body a naked humanity in all its evidence.

The paintings unveil the photographic act as *a relationship between visibility and concealment*, a relationship that is always the result of a 'vision,' thus unmasking the alleged objectivity of documents and traces of evidence, the memory crystallized in images.

Instead of resolving the ambiguities of the visible, Richter stresses them: by blurring the vision, he not only declares the incompleteness of the image, but also opens a gap in the alleged capacity of media images to give shape to experience. Nonetheless, something in the process *is* revealed: our own gaze and its crisis. Richter represents both photography and its off-screen: our will to see but also our eagerness to possess, the violence of our vision. In relation to this aspect, the use of *flou* and *sfumato*, by forcing us to focus on the painting in a different way, breaks off with our perceptive habits and, in the case of the photographs of the Baader-Meinhof Gang used as a model, breaks the crystallized form of the memory and trauma, opening the possibility for a new kind of understanding.

The same can be said about the representation of Baader's dead body, to whom the couple of paintings *Man Shot Down 1-2* are dedicated. In this case the difference between the two versions of the same image is overtly acknowledged. The passage from the one vision to the other forces us to change our way of looking, thus revealing the workings of representation and its weight in defining our experience. It is in the unnatural position of the body, lying down diagonally through the horizontal width of the canvas, the head tilted backwards and the left arm abandoned with no control that death is revealed. The body, still discernible in this painting, is surrounded by indefinite objects similar to flashes of light or black stains. In the first version, the richness of details upon which the photograph constructs its evidence (the gun, the cartridge cases, the exact position of the hand) has already disappeared. In the second painting, the point of view and the type of framing have changed: the body is more in the foreground, magnified yet more difficult to see because of the blurring effect. The distinction between the figure and the background is weakened, the body of Baader looks ethereal, immersed in a whitish glow. The experience of death literally becomes here an experience of loss and the dead body is a shapeless figure of an absent-present, the image of a passage towards 'nothingness.' The publication of the photos (close-ups) of Baader's dead body, his head surrounded by blood, gave rise to a scandal and a debate about the obscenity of the horror turned into a show. The image re-proposed in Richter's paintings is not there to denounce the cruel glance of the media, rather it invites us to look at death as a limit and a paradox, as a mysterious evidence which becomes even more obscure when, as in the case of the terrorists, it is bound to a political gesture.

Each of the paintings that belong to the *Oktober* cycle follows the same principle: blurring the vision, withdrawing the subject from its full decipherability. The

“Wir wollen uns mit den Bildern unseres Landes befassen”

world we experience is a world of ghosts, dominated by grey, the colour that, since the 1960s, has been elected by Richter as “the only possible equivalent for indifference, non-commitment, absence of opinion, absence of shape [...]. It has the capacity that no other colour has, to make ‘nothing’ visible.”³⁶ Many years later, referring to the *Oktober* cycle, Richter would explain that

*here the indifference of grey is charged with a new pathos. In the light of 18. Oktober 1977, when I see the Grey monochrome paintings I realise that, perhaps, and surely not entirely consciously, that was the only way for me to paint concentration camps. It is impossible to paint the misery of life, except, may be, in grey, to cover it.*³⁷

This association with the representation of concentration camps is symptomatic of the impossibility of representation. The use of a very similar formal strategy indicates the common traumatic root of the works and the difficulty for Richter – particularly with regard to the Holocaust – to give a shape to trauma. It is a long research, started in the early 1960s, which finds in *Oktober* an ideal achievement. Therefore, this work seems to acquire a value which transcends the historical reality represented.

The aesthetic choice of an undefined, ‘hazy’ vision also reminds us of the form of the *image-lacune* theorized by Didi-Huberman: a place where the unveiling is inseparable from the inadequacy to show.

*The lacuna-image is a trace-image and a disappearance-image at the same time. Something remains that is not the thing, but a scrap of its resemblance. Something – very little, a film – remains of a process of annihilation: that something, therefore, bears witness to a disappearance while simultaneously resisting it, since it becomes the opportunity of its possible remembrance. It is neither full presence, nor absolute absence. It is neither resurrection, nor death without remains. It is death insofar as it makes remains. It is a world proliferating with lacunae, with singular images which, placed together in a montage, will encourage readability, an effect of knowledge.*³⁸

The very idea of montage as a juxtaposition of fragments that is able to reveal new meanings, provides further suggestions of how to interpret Richter’s work. *Oktober* is a cycle, a series of paintings which cannot be split into parts. This formal configuration invites us to read the cycle privileging simultaneity rather than chronology. However, a ‘narrative’ order is not utterly excluded. Although there is no prearranged plan, *Jugendbildnis* is usually considered the first paint-

³⁶ Gerhard Richter, *From a Letter to Edy de Wilde, 23 February 1975*, in Hans Ulrich Obrist (ed.), *The Daily Practice of Painting: Writings and Interviews 1962-1993*, MIT Press, Cambridge (MA) 1995, pp. 82-83.

³⁷ Interviewed by Gregorio Magnani, “Gerhard Richter: For Me It Is Absolutely Necessary that the Baader-Meinhof Is a Subject for Art,” in *Flash Art*, no. 146, May-June 1989, pp. 94-97, p. 97. Richter is referring here to the big grey painting titled *Graue Bilder* and realized between 1972 and 1976.

³⁸ Georges Didi-Huberman, *Images malgré tout*, Les Editions de Minuit, Paris 2003 (Eng. ed. *Images in Spite All*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago-London 2008, p. 167).

ing: it portrays the young Meinhof before she decided to devote herself to the armed struggle. This image, which “has the formal coordinates of the photographs published in high school yearbooks,”³⁹ shows a melancholic teenager, thus suggesting an horizon of possibilities later denied. The last painting of the cycle is *Beerdigung*, the big funeral painting. This conclusion underlines an existential and political path of loss and failure. We cannot reconstruct here the very long ordeal that preceded the authorization for the burial of the three terrorists in a cemetery of Stuttgart, after the refusal of many cities to enable the burial to take place. Let us just mention that the recognition of the right to be buried in a peaceful place, as well as the possibility to receive a funeral, caused a controversy, which prevented the mourning process from taking its course.

The argument concerning the burial, the refusal to erect a monument thus granting a “place of recollection,” becomes the very centre of the political and cultural discussion of the German Autumn, with an intensity that seems to echo Antigone’s tragic archetype. In this climate, the funerals, followed by thousands of political militants and by hundreds of photographers and television operators, turn into an incandescent farewell rite, resembling more a tribute paid to martyrs than a leave-taking. In the big painting (200 cm. x 320 cm.) that Richter dedicates to this event, the funeral procession and the crowd in the cemetery can be recognized as such only from a certain distance: if we get closer to the painting we can see only different shades of grey. There is no celebratory intent and no sense of an homage; we only perceive a path where the funeral procession and the crowd trace the final steps. It is a farewell, announced by all the images of death within the cycle.

Re-vision

18. Oktober 1977 belongs to an historical-memorial rereading of the years of terrorism where the reconsideration of terrorists as human beings prevails over their being seen as mere political subjects. This interpretation became a recurring one in the 1990s, when the problem seemed to concern, in particular, the legitimacy of representing dead bodies, as well as the pornographic quality of the vision of death and the cruelty inherent to images: a visual trauma, rather than an historical one.

However, Richter introduces a change compared with the many representations of terrorism that other media, and cinema above all, produced: he is the first one to show the scene of death removed from the “crime scene.” A traumatic, political tangle (the suicide whose circumstances were never completely explained), the death of the terrorists of the Baader-Meinhof Group in fact remains for a long time an off-screen experience: it is suggested, evoked, denied, but never shown or represented in a fictional way. The first film to enter the prison and show the dead bodies is, in 2008, *Der Baader-Meinhof Complex* (Uli

³⁹ Kaja Silverman, *Flesh of My Flesh*, cit., p. 196.

Edel). This resistance to show the corpses is counterbalanced by the tendency to display, right from the beginning, the images of the bodies in the coffin, arranged for the funeral. This can be observed in the well-known image of Holger Meins who, after the hunger strike, looked like a skeleton – a real *figura Christi*, used as a fetishized image of political martyrdom; it can also be said about the dead body of Gudrun Ensslin, tenaciously claimed by her family, which was shown in *Deutschland im Herbst* as a sort of relic in movement. Conversely, Richter avoids any type of sanctification or heroic representation. Rather, he seems to rewrite the images of trauma, removing them from the spectacular and disciplining discourse of the media and revealing to us the *reality of death*, within the image. Richter dramatically reverses the image of the crime and exhorts us to look in this “commonplace,” mysterious and banal, unimaginable and yet well-known, and to recognize something which belongs to us.