GERHARD RICHTER

edited by Benjamin H.D. Buchloh. The MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, U.S.A., 2009. 200 pp., illus. Trade, paper. ISBN: 978-0-262-01351-2, ISBN: 978-026-251312-8.

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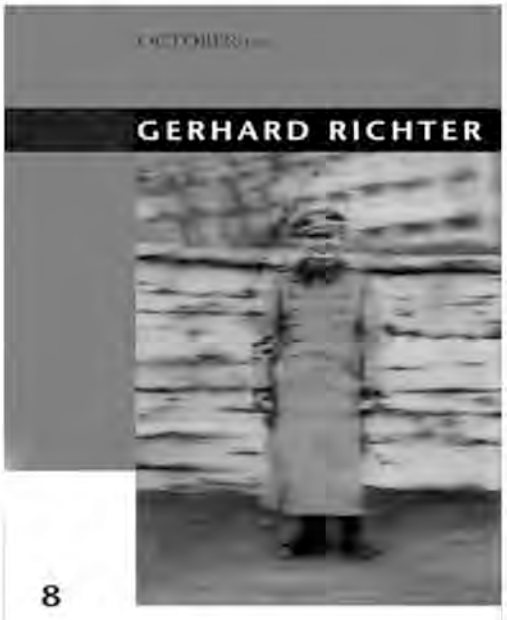
Gerhard Richter, the eighth publication of MIT's October Files series, offers a collection of interviews and essays that examine this virtuoso painter's oeuvre, his historical position and how he "fits" within the contemporary climate. Composed of two interviews with the editor Benjamin H.D. Buchloh (from 1986 and 2004) and eight critical essays (by Gertrud Koch, Thomas Crow, Birget Pelzer, Hal Foster, Peter Osborne, Buchloh, Johannes Meinhardt and Rachel Haidu), this book is a fine and inexpensive addition to the publications that examine the work of this talented and versatile painter.

Scholars of Richter's work will no doubt appreciate these essays, which encapsulate long-standing debates about Richter's contributions. For example, the philosopher Peter Osborne argues that Richter's paintings

> register the historical negation of the representational function of painting by photography, by conceding to photography the primary determination of the representation form of the image—both by making photographs



Gerhard Richter by Benjamin H. D. Buchloh. (Reviewed by Amy Ione, Leonardo 43, no. 5 (2010): 506-507.)

> their subject matter and by themselves submitting to a quasi-photographic mode of "objective" representational mimesis (p. 95).

This view, he tells us, is also a response to the notion of "the aesthetic" offered by an art historian, Paul Wood. In all honesty, while some of the essays were lively, Hal Foster's for example, much of the academic sparring seems a bit contrived when compared to the visual aliveness of Richter's work.

One much-discussed topic is the relationship between painting and photography, since Richter has often used photographs as source material. Another theme that has captivated the contributors is where the superb paintings of Gerhard Richter "fit" in a culture where painting is now "dead." Foster delves into this through Michael Fried's work and the debates about the death of painting in the 1970s, which no doubt Richter was aware of early in his career, since his first exhibition in the U.S.A. took place at the Reinhard Onnasch Gallery in 1973. Even the product description looks at the achievements of Richter within the "painting is dead" frame, characterizing Richter (born in 1932) "as modernity's last painter and as painting's modern savior, [he seems] to represent both the end of painting and its resurrection." The comments do not seem to take into account painters such as Francis Bacon (1909–1992) or Lucian Freud (b. 1922), who, although a bit older, are still seen by many as artists who showed that painting is still "alive" to those who paint. Jasper Johns, Jr. (b. 1930), and David Hockney (b. 1937) also come to mind as successful painters who continue to develop their craft.

Given the contemporary nature of Richter's work, I found the "painting is dead" question more academic than pertinent. It is my impression that Richter does as well. When questioned about his urge to paint he has said: "I am bourgeois enough to go on eating with a knife and fork, just as I paint in oil on canvas" (p. 128). Moreover, his on-line biography states: "Richter's beliefs are credited with refreshing art and rejuvenating painting as a medium during a period when many artists chose performance and ready-made media." All in all, reading these discussions brought to mind earlier pronouncements of painting's demise, most famously by the Salon painter Paul Delaroche (1797–1856), who reportedly said after seeing his first daguerreotype in 1839, "From today, painting is dead."

While Richter is a traditionalist technique-wise, his works acknowledge current political events and have embraced newer forms of image-making as source material. Indeed, one of his most challenging works is *October 18, 1977*, a series based on photographs that charted a well-known event in Germany that took place on that date. Briefly, three young German radicals, members of the militant Baader-Meinhof group, were found dead in a Stuttgart prison. Although they were said to be suicides, many people suspected that the state police murdered them. Eleven years after this traumatic event, Richter created the 15 paintings known as the *October 18, 1977* series, based on photographs of moments in the lives and deaths of four members of the Red Army Faction (RAF), a German left-wing terrorist group that perpetrated a number of kidnappings and killings throughout the 1970s. His paintings were based on newspaper and police photographs, and he reworked these documentary sources to create dark, blurred and diffuse works. (Images of the works in this series are available on Richter's web site: <www.gerhard-richter.com/exhibitions/exhibition.php?exID=343>. (I presume it is a coincidence, though a compelling one, that this book is published by MIT's October series, and edited by the editors of *October* journal.)

Overall, the strongest chapters of the book are the two interviews with Richter himself. His own words are more engaging and compelling than much of the analysis of his work. At times, also, there are surprising comments. In my earlier readings of Richter books, I must have missed Richter's disdain for Cézanne's works, noted in the 1986 interview. Richter and Buchloh briefly touch upon a remark the artist made to the effect that many amateur photographs are better that the best Cézanne. In the 2004 interview, where Richter said he wished he could paint like Matisse, I was reminded of Matisse's comment that Cézanne was the "Father of us all" and wondered if Richter's feelings about Cézanne have changed since he made his Cézanne comment in the 1980s. I was less surprised that Richter appreciated the shimmering qualities of Bridget Riley's paintings, because some of his recent paintings of scientific elements actually bring her work to mind, as I discuss in the following paragraph.

If one wanted to read only one chapter of the *Gerhard Richter* book, I would recommend the final one, his interview with Buchloh from 2004. Richter talks extensively about his *Strukturen* [Structures] paintings. Inspired by microscopic photographs, these images include many devices from Richter's earlier work (blurriness, monochromaticity, etc.) and yet have a visual dynamic that is strikingly fresh. I was not surprised to learn how much he has relished producing them. He tells Buchloh:

> I waited far too long for a motif to finally fall into my hands that fascinated me, that I absolutely wanted to paint. This is how the four large new paintings came about. I called them *Strukturen* [Structures] because they happen to form kind of a structure. And because in some cases I don't even know what kind of substance the illustration is supposed to depict. Only the original, the microscopic photograph from the popular science magazine, has any claim to illustrating science (p. 167).

For inexpensive introductions to contemporary artists, the October Files series is a winner. These books give the general public access to the work of this artist of the postwar period, who has altered our understanding of art in significant ways and prompted a critical literature that is both sophisticated and sustained. In *Gerhard Richter*, the use of black-and-white reproductions is not as problematic as is often the case in inexpensive productions, since many of his works are monochromatic to begin with, although the reduced size is, as always, problematic. Color images translated into black and white are well done, but I cannot imagine that anyone who has not seen the originals will genuinely grasp the power of Richter's visuals. Given this, I would recommend that readers look for originals and/or turn to Richter's website <www.gerhard-richter.com>, created and maintained by Joe Hage, to supplement the book. On the site there are also audios and videos that supplement this publication.