

7. The Grey Space Between: Gerhard Richter's *18. Oktober 1977*

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On Tuesday 18 October 1977 Andreas Baader, Gudrun Ensslin and Jan-Carl Raspe, three members of West Germany's urban guerrilla organisation, the *Rote Armee Fraktion* (Red Army Fraction/RAF), or Baader-Meinhof group, as they were later known, were found dead in their cells in Stammheim prison.¹ Gerhard Richter took the date of these deaths as the impetus and the title for a cycle of 15 blurred 'photopaintings'.² The date of the cycle's execution and public exhibition is as important to German history as that which gives it its title. In 1988, Germany was on the cusp of uncertainty: the borders that defined post-war Germany were about to crumble. As the geographical, political and cultural borders embodied by the Berlin Wall began to collapse the following year, responses to Richter's cycle pointed to its transgression of another set of borders: the works engaged in the increasingly vocal doubts about official versions of post-war German history.³ They cast a shadow over the histories that have been written in the space between these two landmark events in post-war Germany. The intransigence of distinctions between the guilty and the innocent, perpetrators and victims, and the past and the present were the subject of an animated public and scholarly debate in West Germany during the 1980s known as the *Historikerstreit* (the historians' dispute).⁴ These debates focused primarily on the legacies of Nazism in Adenauer and post-Adenauer Germany. Richter's paintings, however, shift focus to address the space between the 1970s and the late 1980s. Nevertheless, *18. Oktober 1977* responds to the call in its midst for images to represent, interrogate and remember the ongoing individual and collective responsibility to history, no matter how distant it may appear. In turn, all of these issues are played

out on the surface of the paintings in *18.Oktober 1977*.

The works in the cycle explore through erasure: they define a set of dichotomies and then proceed to diffuse them. One of the most significant distinctions lies between the RAF revolutionaries as criminals and the institutions of the state as upholders of social order. As we move through the cycle, we also recognise the fallibility of the distinction between the public narratives of official history and those of the emotional lives of individuals. Furthermore, the lines between life and death, between the artist and the state, between museum visitor as viewer and the paintings as viewed are all blurred, even dissolved in the moment of viewing. Behind the challenge to otherwise clear demarcations lie two of Richter's signature formal concerns: an exploration of the interface between photography and painting, and the space – both physical and narrative – between the paintings as they hang on the pristine white walls of the gallery. All of these strategies amount to the most profound space-between, namely, the spectatorial space carved out by the cycle in the process of its viewing, in its engagement with a spectator. The grey space-between established in the works' surface articulations produces a fundamentally destabilising viewing experience. This experience is characterised by a simultaneous invitation to an emotional engagement of each individual viewer and a withholding of all such possibility, a withholding that ultimately guarantees an intellectual involvement with the paintings. This complex process ultimately forces the German museum-goer to recognise her need to keep searching for a place from which to remember and rethink her relationship to German history and its representation.

The disquiet stirred in the viewer by the paintings is central to the status of *18. Oktober 1977* as an agent in the process of bearing witness to the events of the German past. According to established definitions of witnessing, in particular, those reliant on the influential theories of Dori Laub and Shoshana Felman, a painting cannot be a witness. For Laub and Felman, the visual object is always a medium and never an agent in the act of bearing witness. The image is understood only to mediate the intersubjective relation between survivor-witness and the listener/viewer-witness. However, in this chapter, I want to make a more radical argument. Namely, I imbue the works in *18. Oktober 1977* with an agency: I argue that they are directly involved in an intersubjective relationship that serves to articulate a process of bearing witness.

I base this notion of the image as agent on the provocative, though self-consciously equivocal, thinking of W. J. T. Mitchell in his recent book, *What Do Pictures Want?*²⁵ Mitchell insists that he does not want to personify pictures, but rather, that as viewers, spectators and consumers of images, we see them, criticise them, appropriate them and replicate them as though they were animated. We give them the power of vivification. When asked if he really believes that images, for example, have desires and 'want things', Mitchell responds, 'No, I don't believe it. But we cannot ignore that human beings (including myself) insist on talking and behaving as if they *did* believe it.'²⁶ Richter's representations are not actual witnesses of the Baader-Meinhof deaths. But in our active dialectical involvement in the process of viewing the cycle, the paintings can be approached as agents in an intersubjective process of witnessing. As Mitchell would have it, we ask questions of them, we project our desires onto them, they '[seduce] us to feel and act in specific ways?'²⁷ Specifically, the

surface sensitivities of Richter's paintings entice us to enter into a relationship with them. The physically, emotionally and intellectually active viewer, and especially the German viewer, gives them the power of involvement in the revivification of history. Through the feints of their surface ambiguities, through their opening up of a series of grey spaces-between, these paintings become 'lifelike' and history becomes re-energised – witnessed – in the intersubjective process of reception.

By 1988, attention had shifted away from the social turmoil caused by the RAF in West Germany during the 1970s. Consideration of these past events and their significance for the German state was nowhere to be found in the vociferous celebrations of reunification that dominated the political, social and cultural landscape of Germany in 1989. Richter's paintings provoke, unsettle and remind their contemporaries that the highly-charged events of the late 1960s and 1970s are central to their own social revolution. Like the process of exchange between the analysand and the analyst, who facilitates the former's recovery of deep memory, these paintings engage in a process of witnessing through their three-way interaction with viewers and the represented past. As agents in the process of bearing witness, the paintings agitate their viewer and re-expose the not-yet-worked-through collective traumas of the German past. In this chapter, I argue that the paintings in *18. Oktober 1977* revive these otherwise repressed traumas in the minds of their viewers. To reiterate, this process is begun in the nebulous grey space that is exposed when otherwise independent discourses begin to bleed into one another.⁸ Moreover, it is a grey space that commences in the sensuous and aesthetic qualities of these monochrome images.

Lastly, of critical importance to the emotional effect and intellectual insight of the paintings in the process of bearing witness is that they be experienced in non-linear narrative possibilities. All of the individual paintings of *18. Oktober 1977* are self-contained and able to be viewed in isolation. However, they also make sense in their narrative progression beginning with a portrait of Ulrike Meinhof, through images of arrest, incarceration, an image of Baader's cell and record player (which concealed the gun he used for suicide), death, autopsy and funeral. Within this narrative of temporal progression, some works also fall into clusters in diptych and triptych formations. Because the museum visitor's experience of the cycle is inflected by the order in which individual paintings are viewed, it is also enlightening to explore the possible non-linear paths through the cycle. Thus the cycle creates different sets of meanings depending on the order in which the paintings are experienced.

The Baader-Meinhof group wrought havoc on the post-war status quo of West Germany in the late 1960s and 1970s. From the arson of two Frankfurt department stores in October 1968 to the kidnapping and slaying of Mercedes-Benz executive Hans Martin Schleyer in September 1977, and the hijacking of a Lufthansa jet a few weeks later, the young radicals spawned a civil conflict that reverberated through all levels of West German government and a range of capitalist institutions, including the West German press.⁹ Images of the Baader-Meinhof littered the popular press – television, newspapers, right and left wing publications – and they came to be labelled 'the number one enemy of the State'.¹⁰ Wanted posters covered in mug shots offering rewards for information on the whereabouts of these *Anarchistische Gewalttäter* (Anarchist Violent Criminals) were pasted on every available surface across the country.¹¹ Images of the revolutionaries claimed to capture the violence,

aggression and injustice of their actions. The members of the Baader-Meinhof group were represented as dangerous, irrational and out of control. This image of danger and uncontrollable otherness is the convention that Richter's paintings most obviously question.¹²

One of the most familiar press images is the often replayed fragment of news footage depicting the arrest of Baader, Holger Meins and Jan-Carl Raspe on 1 June 1972 outside a Frankfurt garage. The footage exemplifies the official agencies' construction of the group.¹³ Having appeared as instructed at the entrance of the garage in their underwear, the resistant Meins and Raspe are dragged one at a time, past the combat tank brought in as back up, into the thin crowd of policemen, press and general public gathered on the streets. Baader stands fully clothed at the entrance to the garage and, after being shot in the torso, his still struggling weight is carried to an ambulance. The three individuals are furious at the injustice of their treatment. As they kick, writhe and scream in protest, their near-naked or seriously wounded bodies are flanked by perfectly composed, silent policemen, their uniforms unruffled and their faces expressionless. The image is framed alternately from above and at street level when the camera follows the police-escorted prisoners, always keeping the body of the young radical in centre frame. The irrepressible anger and apparent hysteria of Baader, Meins and Raspe is emphasised as much by the unswerving composure of the police as it is by the jerky, handheld movements of the camera that films the captured. As they scream and thrash their bodies in an attempt to break free, the revolutionaries are filmed to appear like dangerous lunatics, wholly other to the human bystanders.

Two of the earliest images of *18. Oktober 1977* are based on photographic stills produced from this press footage. Like all of the paintings in the cycle, *Arrest 1 (Festnahme 1)* and *Arrest 2 (Festnahme 2)* mimic the aspect ratio of snapshot photographs. Although both are oil on canvas and at 92 x 126.5 cm are significantly larger than snapshots, the paintings explore the medium and semantics of the press photograph.¹⁴ Through the works' attention to the medium of painting, the two images also interrogate the intersection of photography and painting. And where painting and photography meet, we find Richter's most devastating claim regarding the failure of both media to mimetically depict the reality of that which they see. In turn, this failure becomes the ground on which the viewer is invited to confront her own assumptions about that reality, the ground on which the historical trauma is brought back to life. Thus, Richter refuses to dichotomise the photographic representation and that of his paintings. Rather, he uses the discrepancies between the two media to find a common ground. And he discovers this common ground to be fraught with epistemological uncertainty.

The negotiation of the space between painting and photography begins on the surface of the painting. It begins with the application of Richter's steel grey palette to the blur of his brushstroke. Richter describes grey as the mediator, the space in-between, the uncertain, the ill-defined. The colour is, he says, 'the welcome and only possible equivalent for indifference, non-commitment, absence of opinion, absence of shape'.¹⁵ Richter's grey transforms the black and white intensities in high-contrast press photography of the period. The source photographs of paintings such as *Arrest 1* and *2* found in the illustrated press were high-contrast black-and-white images that

claimed to capture the objectivity of actual events. Richter's re-painted version of the same scene is consciously grey and hazy. It appears uncertain of its status as objective or otherwise. Together with the blurring of the painted surface, the shift to grey encourages the viewer to question the veracity of the image. We puzzle over what we see in the painting and, by association, what the source photograph saw.

All of the *18. Oktober 1977* paintings use the same aesthetic strategies as the *Arrest* diptych to bring us physically closer to the images, then to distance us from their content. The austere grey, the blur, the physical distance of the events from the high-angle perspective of the point of view all remove the events from our grasp; they render them cold and distant. The blurred grey rejects the clarity of a press photograph, renders it out of focus, a mistake. Thus, the re-painting appropriates the press photograph's distant point of view to indicate that the photographs and paintings meet in the mutual prohibition of their access to reality. In their appropriation and manipulation of the parameters of photography – aspect ratio, colour, contrast, perspective and focus – the paintings in the cycle offer a critique of the photograph's representational truth claim.

Arrest 1 and *2* are almost identical, but only almost. Although they are of identical dimension, they show two different scenes. This inclusion of multiple yet individually discrete images contributes to the paintings' further departure from the reality they claim to depict. The strategy refers to the mass reproducibility of the photograph and, in particular, the mass reproduction of the source press photograph. The repetition also calls attention to the photograph's spurious claim to objectivity. No matter how many times a photograph is reproduced, it can only ever approximate what it represents. The slight differentiation in each repetition of Richter's paintings reminds us of this. Of course, the same could be said of Richter's paintings: they do not come any closer to the truth of the photograph's subject matter. They are, after all, representations of representations; as removed from the historical events as the distance from which they depict. However, unlike the photographic versions, images such as the *Arrest* diptych do not claim to access the truth, or to offer a definitive vision. Above and beyond the challenge to the veracity of the press photograph, *18. Oktober 1977* refuses both its own basic truth claims, and also those of painting more broadly. The paintings' representational elusiveness and their blurring of the distinctions between photography and painting form the foundation for a much deeper truth: the viewer's active involvement in the process of rekindling the otherwise buried historical trauma.

PUBLIC HISTORY AND INDIVIDUAL LIFE

The relationship of scepticism between painting and photography, and between historical events and their representation, provides the vacillating platform on which Richter interrogates the distinction between public history – the Baader-Meinhof as they conceive of themselves and are conceived of by state-sanctioned institutions – and their fate as individuals. The cycle challenges the viewer to negotiate the tension between these two irreconcilable narratives through a provocation of both historical awareness and emotional engagement. In turn, two simultaneous responses merge to encourage the viewer to remember the events of 18 October 1977, and

to question their official representation. In particular, while the source photographs announce the closure or finality of the historical events they depict, so Richter brings the event back to life through a focus on the individual. More specifically, like many of the late 1980s representations of the 1970s 'German Autumn', the paintings only give the appearance of offering access to the desires and emotions of the represented individuals. Because as soon as the invitation is extended, it is retracted. In turn, this stopping short of what the paintings portend to provide prompts an intellectual engagement. This process is key to the revivification of memories of broader historical events in the mind of the viewer.¹⁶ Once again, what remains unique about Richter's paintings is the use of paint and the painted surface to reiterate the historical 'space between' that is examined in their representation.



Figure 1: Gerhard Richter (b. 1932), *Hanged (Erhängte)* from 'October 18, 1977' (1988). New York, Museum of Modern Art (MoMA).

Hanged (Erhängte) (figure 1) is one of five single images in the cycle. It depicts the disturbing scene of Gudrun Ensslin hanged in her cell. Due to the intensity of the blurring, we are unsure of the identity of the corpse. If we are aware of the historical details, then we will know that it is Ensslin who was found 'hanged' in her cell on the morning of 18 October 1977. However, the date of the cycle's title is designed to confuse rather than clarify, and it would be misleading to identify the corpse on the basis of this information alone.¹⁷ Nevertheless,

identification of the individual is not what is at stake in *Hanged*. Indeed, the inability to identify and individualise the corpse is perhaps the point. For unlike the sensationalism of the full-frontal, black and white press image from which *Hanged* is drawn, the blur of Richter's painting, the lack of distinction between figure and ground, and the placement of the body in the recess of the image all protect Ensslin's corpse from the ogling eyes of the viewer. Simultaneously, these aesthetic elements ensure the continued effort of the viewer to search for clarity and meaning. The blurring guarantees a sustained engagement with the painting which is, in turn, the basis of the painting's involvement in the process of bearing witness. Ensslin's body was found hidden behind a woollen blanket in the window alcove. When the image appeared in the magazine weekly *Stern*, her body was depicted in a full-length, full-frontal shot in which all but the window frame behind her and the ground beneath her feet was cropped away.¹⁸ A tape measure ran the length of her body in a gesture of scientific rationalisation. Richter recoups Ensslin's 'privacy' when he safely sequesters the corpse behind the surface of the brushstroke, the blurred surface of the image. He also places the figure well into the background of the image.

The identity of the body may be hidden in the depths of the painting, behind the brushstroke, but the viewer is drawn into the painting, the cell and Ensslin's silence through the use of light and composition. Richter frames the figure through an exaggeration of the blanket, which is now a black curtain to the left of the image, and the

bright white of the wall that runs along the right side of the frame. With almost half the vertical space of the image being consumed by this inner framing device, the relative boldness of the black-and-white elements guides our vision towards the vertical, seemingly elongated, blurred grey figure in the centre. Even though the image is blurred, the framing device ensures that there is little else in the image to distract us from the figure. While the aesthetic manipulation of the grey painted surface repeats Ensslin's seclusion in death behind the curtain, Richter simultaneously invites us to peer through the frame of Ensslin's room into the space of her death. The blurring also entices us physically closer to the painting as we step forward to see behind the veil-like haze of the blurred surface. Nevertheless, the closer we go, the less we can see of the figure and the more the image dissolves into the abstraction of paint on a canvas. Like the dots of a printed-press photograph, the medium of paint is reduced, at close range, to abstract lines, shades and forms on Richter's canvas. Thus, *Hanged* withholds the information and knowledge that is claimed through clarity of detail by the photographic reproduction on which it is based. To borrow Mitchell's rhetoric, this is a painting that wants simultaneously to be seen and to be left alone.¹⁹

The press image emphasises information that confirms the event has indisputably taken place; it has been documented for the historical record and now belongs to the past. *Hanged* is concerned to reopen the historical record, to revive the event in its various forms of representation, and to explore the brutality and isolation of Ensslin's death. *Hanged* does more than repeat the coldness of the photographic representation in the popular press. Through obscuring the image, denying access to Ensslin's corpse, the painting asks the viewer to acknowledge representation (both photographic and painted) as a transgression of the space of an individual's death. Specifically, she was an individual forced to die isolated from a world that insisted on littering every possible surface in the public eye with her face. *Hanged* thus provokes the viewer to recall an image and an historical event that had otherwise been laid to rest by a press photograph when it claimed the last word. Richter's painting unfixes the past by clouding it in aesthetic and historical uncertainty. *Hanged* explores the tension between the official desire to resolve and close the door on events of the past, and the urgency to keep this ephemeral moment alive in the public imagination. By doing so, it generates an intersubjective relationship with the viewer, which is at the heart of a process of bearing witness to the past.

Images such as the *Confrontation* (*Gegenüberstellung*) triptych of Gudrun Ensslin (figures 2-4) as she poses for a line-up exaggerate this tension between public history and individual experience even further. Through the interrogation of the space between these irreconcilable narratives, the paintings are involved in the creation of a space that enables the viewer to move beyond a confrontation with an unresolved history to a recogni-



Figure 2: Gerhard Richter (b. 1932), *Confrontation 1* (*Gegenüberstellung 1*) from 'October 18, 1977' (1988). New York, Museum of Modern Art (MoMA).



Figure 3: Gerhard Richter (b. 1932), *Confrontation 2 (Gegenüberstellung 2)* from 'October 18, 1977' (1988). New York, Museum of Modern Art (MoMA).



Figure 4: Gerhard Richter (b. 1932), *Confrontation 3 (Gegenüberstellung 3)* from 'October 18, 1977' (1988). New York, Museum of Modern Art (MoMA).

tion of her own implication in this same historical narrative. All of the same compositional strategies are used in *Confrontation* to draw attention to the facial expressions and bodily disposition of Ensslin's figure. However, this time Ensslin is identifiable and her gestures are legible. When the minutiae of these gestures and emotions are revealed by the painting, the physical, psychological and emotional relationship between figure and viewer becomes unsettling. In the same moment that we are drawn toward Ensslin's physical being and engage with the privacy of her emotions, we are confronted with the revolutionary as a reflection of our own selves. She is no longer simply the anonymous captive of the source photograph who brought about civil chaos and suffered the consequences. In *Confrontation*, Richter paints an emotionally alive individual who is also entrapped by social and political institutions. As viewers of this triptych, we not only observe, but we are seduced into the space of Ensslin's entrapment. And, as I shall argue, thanks to the discursive qualities of the painting, we become implicated in her plight.

The source photographs for *Confrontation* were taken as Ensslin entered the Stammheim courthouse having been out of the public eye for a month while in captivity. Like the successive images of a film sequence, in *Confrontation*, Ensslin is paraded in her prison garb before our inquisitive eyes. Here Richter introduces another set of interstices, namely the space between the paintings, to undermine the fixity of our position as viewer and Ensslin and her representation as viewed. Somewhere between the first and the second

Confrontation paintings the individual is brought into the spotlight. The first painting is not only blurred, but the contrast between the black of Ensslin's shirt and the white skin of her neck, and again, between the background and her dull prison attire is muted. Due to the blur of the painted surface, in the first of these three identically-sized paintings, we are unable to determine if Ensslin is smiling or surprised, quietly contemplative or suspicious of the eyes that watch her. The middle image shows Ensslin's face so alive that we can feel the brightness of her surprised eyes. While in the first painting her left shoulder is in the process of turning to the viewer, in the second, her body is all but squared within the frame. It is as though she has recognised someone in the crowd, and now, she looks directly at the viewer. Despite the blur to the left side of her face, and the uncertainty it engenders, Ensslin's animated expression touches us because it is directed towards, and perhaps intended for us.

An alteration in the lighting, the distinction of Ensslin's figure from the background and the relative clarity and softness of her face allow her to motion towards the front of the image, away from the wall against which she is pinned in the first *Confrontation*. Thus, across the space of the first and second paintings, Ensslin is physically and emotionally opened up to the viewer.

In the third painting, Ensslin's body has once again turned away from the viewer, her head is bowed, and although her mouth is now without signs of tension, perhaps even with the remnants of a smile, her emotions are once again out of reach. Ensslin's figure is now in a three-quarter length as opposed to head and shoulders composition. Her profiled face now shines under a much harsher, colder light and her prison dress, shadow and background merge into a dark middling grey. The physical and emotional retreat, or refusal, of *Confrontation* leads us through painfully private emotional states of the prisoner. Of course, it is not that we are really engaged with the emotional life of Ensslin, but once again, this is the feint of Richter's painted representation of a photograph that invites us to participate in its narratives. Through this process, the triptych also protects Ensslin's vulnerability; it always keeps her slightly ambiguous, her feelings are never quite tactile because they are only ever a painted appearance. The paintings watch the figure move towards us, away from us, open her gestures out to us, and then retract the invitation to connect to them. In turn, the viewer's identification and sustained engagement with Ensslin as emotive individual through the narrative played out across the gallery wall stimulates his own involvement in the larger historical narrative. Through engaging us in this direct encounter with the individual Ensslin, the triptych sets in motion a process of witnessing the historical trauma. It forces us to recognise our role in and responsibility to the historical past of which Ensslin was a central public media figure.

Ultimately, however, the viewer can never fully identify with Ensslin as she is presented in *Confrontation*. 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.²⁰ Their images function like those of film stars when they give the impression of psychological and emotional depth, while all the time representing a generic public image representative of an idea, an illusion. This does not absolve our responsibility, but on the contrary, it underlines it. We are thrust into a space between the well-rehearsed public history of the RAF leader as criminal and an affective recognition of Richter's narration of Ensslin as a psychologically complex individual with whom we strive to connect. As we shift between identification with the painted figure as a real historical person and recognition of her image as a construction of the press, we are drawn ever deeper into the revivification of the history of which she is a protagonist and in which we are consequently implicated. Thus the 'confrontation' of the triptych's title might be understood as the image's confrontation with the viewer to assume the responsibility for the continuing urgency to keep these narratives alive.

ARCHIVES OF THE STATE AND THE ARTIST

18. Oktober 1977's scrutiny of the spaces between official institutional representations of the RAF and those which challenge these representations extends to an

interrogation of the unstable relationship between the handling of the photographic images by the German State and by Richter himself. This layer of analysis is formed when the paintings work with and against the use, dissemination and storage of the source photographs for official purposes.

In a gesture of fear and simultaneous fascination with the power of the photograph's presumed potential for anarchy, thanks to both its potent subject and its inherent reproducibility, the police-commissioned photographs of the RAF were carefully archived out of public sight. The Baader-Meinhof members were subjected to the same processes of possession, domination and de-individualisation that has been the fate of all modern social deviants when they were photographed for identification purposes. In turn, the photographs were themselves sorted and classified in an attempt to stymie their wont to cause social unrest. RAF activities continued in the wake of the Stammheim deaths. There was unprecedented controversy and political scandal surrounding the deaths due to the possibility that the state had perpetrated murder. The brighter the spotlight shone on images of the Baader Meinhof deaths by the press, the more intense the public indignation. Social order was consequently sought through the systematisation of reproducible images which were threatening to proliferate uncontrollably. With the photographs archived away, the threat was erased, or at least hidden from view. Similar to the obsessive organisation and cataloguing of identification photographs pioneered by late nineteenth-century police forces, the public prosecutor's office in Stuttgart reduced the official photographs taken at the time of the RAF deaths to abstract, quantifiable objects when it placed them in an archive.²¹ Like so many sensitive documents that harbour the potential to expose vulnerability and culpability in official ranks, the RAF photographs were, according to Robert Storr, all but inaccessible to the public.²²

While Richter challenges the objectivity of the photographs through blurring, the handling of the source images by the public prosecutor's office would have us believe in their mimetic credibility. When placed in an archive that took the form of a locked filing cabinet, the images were defined and legitimated as objective documents which could potentially prove a crime. The fear of and need to master the perpetrator-revolutionary as social aberration is here transferred onto the photographs that depict him or her. As modern idolators, the German officials who commanded ownership of these images appeared not only to believe in the indexicality of the photographic image, but to equate the image with the subject.²³ Unwittingly, such acts of archival hoarding elevate the image and its subject to the status of fetish. These practices remind us of the conservation of old graven images to protect against their power.²⁴ These precious objects had to be hidden away, somewhere safe, where the represented enemy culture could not wreak the havoc it promised. *18. Oktober 1977* resists this desire to fetishise the image when, as I have illustrated, the paintings oscillate between various incompatible, yet interdependent, discourses: painting and photography, life and death, public history and individual experience. And in their act of resistance, the images open up the space in which the viewer is called to revivify her memory of this chapter of German history. And in the grey zone of the space-between, history must be remembered, confronted and engaged if the traumas it generated are not to be repeated in the future. Thus, when they enter into the discourse on the handling of their source photographs, Richter's images ignite a relationship

with their viewer that leads to the witnessing of history. However, Richter's paintings simultaneously replicate the same cycle of archival classification and mastery over the image and what it depicts. Each of the images in *18. Oktober 1977* is drawn from *Atlas*, Richter's own continually evolving photographic archive.²⁵ Since the early 1960s, Richter has continued to compile both found and self-generated photographs into what amounts to a *catalogue raisonné* of the world seen through Richter's eyes. The images range from landscapes and family portraits, through pornography, press photographs and Holocaust images. Some are carefully staged, while others appear to be taken on a whim. Irrespective of aesthetic quality, all of them are meticulously ordered, systematised, according to how Gerhard Richter sees. It is not an order that is apparent to all. Richter's system is, in the end, subjective. Just as the museum visitor is on the precipice of grasping the logic of Richter's selection and ordering of the photographs in *Atlas*, the criteria are changed. An image that does not belong appears, the one we expect to see is removed or the seemingly logical order is disrupted in some other way. As much as *Atlas* imitates systems of categorisation and mnemonic logic, it also performs its failure to do so.²⁶ Thus, Richter's archival processes plunge his works into yet another grey space of ineffability. They are practices for classifying and containing the aleatory events of history in all its guises. Simultaneously, his work always stops short of containing, thus exercising control over the images it accommodates.

The paintings of *18. Oktober 1977* underline this conundrum. On the most obvious level, the fifteen appropriated photographs on which the *18. Oktober 1977* cycle is based are now absent from the archive of *Atlas*. Their absence rewrites the narrative of *Atlas* from which they are plucked. In their new context of *18. Oktober 1977*, the reworked, painted images rewrite the narrative of the historical events at Stammheim prison. Although *Atlas* incorporates approximately one hundred photographs of the Baader-Meinhof deaths, *18. Oktober 1977* includes only 15. Thus, the painted images are three times appropriated: first in pre-production from the official public discourse, second in production from the photographic medium into painting, and third, for the purposes of exhibition they are appropriated from *Atlas*. Through this three-fold appropriation, Richter distances the images still further from the spectacle identifiable in their press and police contexts. Similarly, his readiness to reorganise his own archive draws attention to the authorities' policy not to disturb theirs.

Richter also gives each image a temporality that it otherwise does not have in its official capacity within a news article, or as forensic evidence. The mass media and official institutions use the image to convey information, information that is typologised, organised according to the categorical separators of a filing cabinet. Richter uses the same images both to indict this mode of communication, and to offer a more tentative, less easily accessed, less instantaneous knowledge. The knowledge offered by the paintings is acquired gradually through an interaction with the image on the part of the viewer as she contemplates the individual lives of the revolutionaries as victims. In effect, we recognise our own humanity in the inner, emotional life of each RAF member. As we watch ourselves attempting to master the image, we are simultaneously humbled before it, forced to recognise our own culpability in its objectification. This complex process of interaction with the depicted figures, with individual painted photographs, and with the space-between, keeps this traumatic

historical moment and its representation alive and urgent in the viewer's mind. The image as witness therefore stirs a self-awareness in the viewer of *18 Oktober, 1977*, and provokes a revivification of complex events that, today, tend to be relegated to a completed chapter in Germany's history.

THE PRESS, THE STATE AND THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

Richter's images as agents in the process of bearing witness do not stop here. Indeed, they continue to fall deeper into the discursive modes of power and knowledge that they critique. Richter is adamant that the cycle not be broken up, that it remain unique and coherent.²⁷ Similarly, he stipulated that it be sold to a museum, that the cycle cannot be adequately housed or exhibited by a private art gallery. When it was finally purchased by New York's Museum of Modern Art in 1995, the irony of Richter's directives became even more accentuated. The chosen fifteen images appropriated from the archive of *Atlas* became housed in one of the world's most revered cultural institutions. Thus, the sale of *18. Oktober 1977* placed the images back in the hands of a capitalist institution that engages in comparable practices of objectification to those the images seek to vilify. As a museum, MoMA is no less committed to the business of commodifying images than is the German illustrated press. The museum is driven by economic imperatives and cultural practices that offer images as objects for aesthetic appreciation, often setting up the limits of interpretation. In exhibitions, the direction and shape of museum visitors' responses are carefully molded through the autocratic organisation of the works into a univocal narrative. The fact that Richter chose MoMA, rather than any other museum, to be the owner of *18. Oktober 1977* underscores the transformation of the paintings from agents in the process of bearing witness to that of cultural commodification. As is widely acknowledged in the art historical and museum world, MoMA imparts an unrivalled economic and cultural value to those works it sanctions through inclusion in its collection.

MoMA included *18. Oktober 1977* in its 2002 retrospective of Richter's oeuvre, which was organised according to the chronology of his career. The MoMA exhibition placed *18. Oktober 1977* and other works in the service of a narrative about Richter the artistic genius. The museum gave no more information about the paintings than the titles and dates of execution. The historical circumstances of the works' production and consumption, the contradictory social discourses out of which they grew, and the historical events to which they refer were not available. American visitors' only chance of learning of these historical discourses came when their path through the exhibition terminated in the bookshop. Thus, like the West German popular press in the 1970s, MoMA exploited the historical images as objects in the interests of promoting its own narrative of cultural dominance. In addition to the economic benefits of the exhibition, it was designed to promote the development of Gerhard Richter as the great contemporary European painter. For all the differences between their strategies of display, both the museum and the popular press strip the image of its connection to its social and historical roots.

In their new context for an American audience, the paintings raise still more questions, and are even more elusive. Despite their apparent pragmatism, the titles

are chosen to create imprecision rather than clarity around the deaths. *Arrest (Festnahme)*, *Confrontation (Gegenüberstellung)* and *Hanged (Erhängte)* all introduce uncertainty into the images: Who is arrested? Someone just outside the images? Perhaps it is the scene before the camera that is arrested? And in *Hanged*, is Ensslin hanged or does she hang herself? Similar questions could be asked of *Confrontation*. Where is the confrontation? Is it between the represented figure and the viewer? Between the law and the individual? Or, as I have claimed, between painting and viewer. The title of the cycle as a whole shows equal ambivalence toward its apparent specificity. Why 18 October 1977 when not all of the paintings represent events that took place on this date? *Youth Portrait (Jugendbildnis)*, a portrait of Meinhof that opens the cycle, is painted from a photograph taken in 1970. The arrests represented in *Arrest* took place in 1972, and Ulrike Meinhof whose displayed corpse is the content of another triptych, *Dead (Tote)*, died on 9 May 1976. Dates are used to confuse rather than clarify or identify images, while titles are given to the paintings as though to quell the urge to archive or organise on the museum wall, yet all the time resisting this possibility. This irresolute use of titles first appropriates and then undercuts the impulse to rationalise that lies behind the preservation of images. *18. Oktober 1977* thus points the finger at the museum as another institutional archive, a cultural companion to the West German State.

Richter's sale of *18. Oktober 1977* to MoMA for US\$ 3 million in 1995 successfully commodified the images in a manner that, for all the differences, reminds us of the source context of the German illustrated press.²⁸ The paintings had been on loan to the Museum for Modern Art in Frankfurt and Richter suddenly sold them without informing the Frankfurt Museum. There was understandable public outrage in Germany over the decision. The German press and art world objected: it was equivalent to selling a part of German history. *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* reported that these paintings represented the trauma of a still unresolved period of history. Indeed, the German response to the sale legitimates my claim for the image as agent in the revivification of historical events in the mind of the spectator. The press argued that by selling them, Richter removed a critical focus for the continued ideological struggle over German history and its memory.²⁹ And we cannot ignore that Richter was in full control of the sale, thus placing himself as complicit in the processes of decontextualisation. For MoMA, *18. Oktober 1977* was an important late twentieth-century artwork. Its purchase signaled 'a serious attempt to strengthen its collection of post-war European art'.³⁰ On the one hand, the ambiguity and inconclusiveness that enables the paintings to bring history alive is erased by the new narrative which casts them as exemplary works of 'post-war European art'. After all, how can an American audience engage in a critique of the representation of historical events for which it is given no context?

On the other hand, Richter's sale and MoMA's purchase of the cycle has brought its commodification to the attention of German critics and magnified its political discourse. Furthermore, the press attracted by the sale in 1995 and the exhibition in 2002 have kept *18. Oktober 1977* and the events it depicts in public discourse far longer than may otherwise have been the case.³¹ Thus, this public exposure of the paintings keeps the ambiguity of their significance alive. Their existence in the archives of one of the art world's most conservative art institutions and the political dis-

courses surrounding their acquisition and exhibition open up a whole new set of contradictions. It is easy to criticise Richter's self-interested transaction, and to renounce MoMA's tendency to champion the radicals as martyrs (as Hilton Kramer argues), or bemoan the erasure of German history.³² However, another approach appreciates Richter's sale and the museum's purchase on the future of these paintings as the engine of a renewed provocation to engage with another historical conundrum from yet another liminal space: the one between 1970s West German political and social institutions and twenty-first century American cultural institutions. The new context of *18. Oktober 1977* adds another layer of uncertainty and contradiction that fuels the image's revivification of traumatic historical events in the mind of the viewer. In turn, MoMA's gesture furthers the project of interrogating and diffusing the grey space between the state and the revolutionary, between public history and individual life, between viewer and viewed (whether the image or the figure it represents). As long as these interstices are the subject and ground of *18. Oktober 1977*, regardless of context, the image remains a potential agent in the intersubjective process of bearing witness to unresolved traumatic historical events.

Notes

- 1 Irmgard Möller was also found with four stab wounds to her chest; however, the wounds were not fatal. The authoritative account of these events and the RAF activities is still Stefan Aust, *The Baader-Meinhof Group: The Inside Story of a Phenomenon*, trans. Anthea Bell (London: The Bodley Head, 1985). All of my references to Baader-Meinhof activities are taken from Aust's account.
- 2 'Photo-paintings' is the term that Richter himself gave to his painted versions of mass-circulated photographs.
- 3 Looming behind Richter's interrogation of the RAF deaths is the controversial question of the role of the Nazi perpetrator in the Holocaust and acts of violence in the Second World War.
- 4 See Ernst Piper (ed.) *Forever in the Shadow of Hitler?: Original Documents of the Historikerstreit, The Controversy Concerning the Singularity of the Holocaust*, trans. James Knowlton and Truett Cates (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1993).
- 5 W. J. T. Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want? The Lives and Loves of Images* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2005).
- 6 *Ibid.*, 11 (emphasis in original).
- 7 *Ibid.*, 25.
- 8 The paintings inhabit numerous other interstices. Gertrud Koch discusses the paintings' negotiation of the space between modernity and pre-modernity as well as Richter's fascination for the interface of photography and painting. See Gertrud Koch, 'The Open Secret: Gerhard Richter and the Surfaces of Modernity', in *Gerhard Richter*, ed. Gertrud Koch (Paris: Éditions Dis Voir, 1995), 9–27.
- 9 These events are not really the first and the last of their campaign, but I cite them as book-ends here because they mark the span of involvement of those radicals whose incarceration and death provides the subject matter of Richter's paintings.
- 10 'Die Baader-Meinhof Story: Wie aus einem Angeber der Staatsfeind Nr. 1 wurde', *Stern*, 11 June 1972, 18–30.
- 11 See Robert Storr, *Gerhard Richter. October 18, 1977* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2000), 40.
- 12 The exaggerated discourses of stigmatisation remind us of the contemporary fear and hys-

teria around Islamic fundamentalist terrorism. The connection to the contemporary situation is significant insofar as I am interested in shifting the focus away from the myopia of early twenty-first-century understanding of terrorism and perpetration. Terrorism is an historical phenomenon with political and geographical specifics and it must be understood as such, that is, within its unique historical context.

- 13 These images are often recycled in documentaries about the RAF and the post-1968 student movement in West Germany. Alternatively, the images have also consistently been appropriated by narrative feature films that refer to the events to make a larger point, usually about social injustice. See, for example, *Stammheim* (Reinhard Hauff, 1986), *Starbuck – Holger Meins* (Gerdt Conradt, 2001), and *Baader* (Christopher Roth, 2001).
- 14 Richter bases *Festnahme 1* and *2* on generic photographs that appeared in much of the sensationalist press at the time.
- 15 Gerhard Richter, 'From a Letter to Edy de Wilde, 23 February 1975', *The Daily Practice of Painting: Writings, 1962-1993*, trans. David Britt (London: Thames and Hudson and Anthony d'Offay Gallery, 1995), 82–3.
- 16 See, for example, the many filmic representations of the RAF era in films such as Margarethe von Trotta's *Die bleierne Zeit* (*German Sisters*, 1981) and the collaborative documentary, *Deutschland im Herbst* (*Germany in Autumn*) (1978).
- 17 The painting could also represent Ulrike Meinhof who was found hanged from a window grating in her cell on 9 May 1976.
- 18 'Der Fall Stammheim', *Stern*, 30 October 1980, 24–5. These images were released to the press when investigation into the cause of the deaths – assumed suicides – was reopened as evidence demonstrated that it would have been impossible for the prisoners to kill themselves. This was especially the case for Andreas Baader when it was deemed impossible for him to have shot the three bullets found in his cell.
- 19 See Mitchell, *What do Pictures Want?*, 39–48.
- 20 Gerhard Richter, *The Daily Practice of Painting*, 193. This notion of the RAF leader as no more than a generic public image representative of an idea or an illusion is most articulately embodied in *Jugendbildnis* (*Youth Portrait*), a portrait of Meinhof as poised and glamorous; as Robert Storr says, she appears just like a movie star. Storr, *Gerhard Richter: October 18, 1977*, 106.
- 21 See Allan Sekula, 'The Body and the Archive', *October* 39 (Winter 1986): 3–64.
- 22 Storr, *Gerhard Richter: October 18, 1977*, 149.
- 23 On this notion of the modern idolator as attributing the image with a value far beyond its objective worth, see W. J. T. Mitchell, *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology* (University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1986).
- 24 This is a standard way of explaining the obsessive collection of objects for the purposes of cultural domination. See Roger Cardinal and John Elsner, 'Introduction', in *The Cultures of Collecting*, eds Roger Cardinal and John Elsner (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1994), 1–6.
- 25 *Atlas* contains one hundred Baader-Meinhof images. See Fred Jahn (ed.) *Atlas* (Munich: Lenbachhaus, 1990).
- 26 See Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, 'Gerhard Richter's *Atlas*: The Anomic Archive', in *Gerhard Richter*, ed. Bruno Corà (Prato: Centro per l'Arte Contemporanea Luigi Pecci, 1999), 155–61.
- 27 Gerhard Richter, *The Daily Practice of Painting*, 203.
- 28 The German press reported that MoMA paid 3 million Deutschmarks (see 'Baader-Meinhof goes West', *Sueddeutsche Zeitung*, 26 June 1995) and the US press that it paid US\$ 3 million. This is one of many discrepancies in the way the sale was reported in press.
- 29 Eduard Beaucamp, 'Exportiertes Trauma', *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 8 June 1995, 35.
- 30 Carol Vogel, 'Inside Art: A Growing Modern', *New York Times*, 16 June 1995, C22.
- 31 These dates are again significant because they coincide with renewed interest in the ongoing struggle to confront German history and its representation that was raised in 1995 by a

controversial exhibition on *Wehrmacht* war crimes. See Hannes Heer and Klaus Naumann (eds) *Vernichtungskrieg Verbrechen der Wehrmacht, 1941–1944* (Hamburg: Institut für Sozialforschung, 1995).

- 32 Hilton Kramer, 'MoMA Helps Martyrdom of German Terrorists', *New York Observer*, 3–10 July 1995, 1, 25.