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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
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
effects 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." Fos
ter 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 Rein-
hard Omasch 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 con-
tinue 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 read-
ymade 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
method-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
chart a well-known event in Germany
that took place on that date. Briefly,
three young German radicals, mem-
bers of the militant Baader-Meinhof
group, were found dead in a Stutt-
gart prison. Although they were said to be
suicides, many people suspected that
the state police murdered them. Eleven
years after this traumatic event, Rich-
ter 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 perpetuated
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=345>.) (I presume it is a coinci-
dence, though a compelling one, that
this book is published by MIT's Octo-
ber series, and edited by the editors of
October journal.)

Overall, the strongest chapters of
the book are the two interviews with Rich-
ter 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 feel-
ings 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 ele-
ments actually bring her work to mind,
as I discuss in the following paragraph.

If one wanted to read only one chap-
ter of the Gerhard Richter book, I would
recommend the final one, his inter-
view 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, monochrom-
icity, 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 criti-
cal 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 any-
one 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.