



## Still Life: Detailing the German Autumn through Gerhard Richter's *Tote (Dead)*

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This paper considers the relationship between two objects: a photograph and a painting. I will examine this relationship in light of the still life tradition, linking Gerhard Richter's painting *Tote* to his common object paintings, which he developed in the 1960s, and to his vanitas of the 1980s. My reading of the still life as a self-consciously constructed image that details the quotidian will illuminate how the relationship between the photograph and the painting exhibits a flatness, an anti-heroic matter-of-factness that points not only to grief and the failure of ideology, but also to the commonness of catastrophe, the reality and emptiness of death.

First the painting. In 1988 Gerhard Richter created a painting of Ulrike Meinhof, a member of the German terrorist group the Baader-Meinhof gang, dead on an examining table, a burn in her neck from hanging. He painted the image three times in decreasing size: 24½" x 28¾", 24½" x 24½", and 13¾" x 15½". For the purposes of this paper I will focus on the first *Tote* that Richter painted in the cycle. Using a brushy grisaille, Richter blends the edges of the body with the dark background. Her head is tilted up, the mark wrapping around her neck a fuzzy line. The image looks clinical and matter-of-fact; this figure is dead, or sleeping, or playing dead.

*Tote (Dead)* is a painting in a series of works that Richter worked on in 1988 for his 18. Oktober 1977 cycle of paintings. He collected photographs primarily from news magazines of the Baader-Meinhof gang and painted the members of the terrorist group in jail gaunt from hunger strikes, as well as the interior of the cells, items found in the cell such as a record



**Fig. 1:** Gerhard Richter, *Tote (Dead)*, 1988, oil on canvas, 24 1/2" x 28 3/4" (Photo courtesy the Museum of Modern Art, New York)

player, and, finally, Richter painted their inert bodies, dead from self-inflicted wounds. The story of the Baader-Meinhof gang, a part of the West German terrorist organization the Red Army Faction, is too involved to relate in detail here. Yet it should be noted that, not unlike the Weather Underground in the United States in the 1960s, this militant terrorist group grew out of the German student movement, opposed the Vietnam War and hoped to create a revolution in what they deemed a fascist West German State. They planted bombs, robbed banks, went into hiding, escaped from jail, and killed people. Subsequently, the group spent many years in a high security prison. On October 17, 1977, three of the members killed themselves in their jail cells. The group suicide was preceded by two failed terrorist acts that were intended to secure the release of the members—the kidnapping and execution of the industrialist Hanns-Martin Schleyer and the thwarted hijacking of a Lufthansa Boeing 737. Several of the members staged and carried out their suicide in a way that implied they were victims. Baader, for instance, placed the gun at the back of his head in order to make it appear as if he were assassinated. Such acts raised questions in the press as to the true nature of their deaths and many believed that prison officials had

executed them. This period of terror and instability in German history is often referred to as the “German Autumn.”<sup>1</sup>

Ulrike Meinhof, namesake to half of the Baader-Meinhof gang, was a somewhat different character from the other members. Raised by a liberal single mother, Meinhof was a prominent figure in the New West German Left. She wrote a biting political column for several years for the student magazine *Konkret* and had the reputation of being a fierce politically-minded intellectual. She was a mother. Ulrike Meinhof hanged herself on May 5, 1976, one year prior to the other group members’ suicides.

With the press photos spread out before him, Gerhard Richter had to make a choice. “The ones that weren’t paintable were the ones I did paint,” he has said.<sup>2</sup> But then, how to paint them? In working out this problem, Richter returned to a style he developed in the early 1960s, a style that grew out of his experimentation with creating paintings that looked like blurred photographs. While Richter developed this style in the early period of his career, he abandoned it soon after for experimentations in landscape and abstract painting, and did not return to using the brushy grisaille look of his early 1960s works until his October cycle. Richter felt that painting photographs freed him from an ascribed style or inherent content. His choices were limited. Using a photograph as source material allowed for a seemingly deskilled approach. “I hate the dazzlement of skill,” he stated in 1964. And one year later he reiterated, “When I paint from a photograph, conscious thinking is eliminated.”<sup>3</sup>

In these paintings of photographs from the early 1960s, Richter concentrated on everyday objects such as a chair made almost ghostly in its shadows and blended edges. When asked by an interviewer about this image, Richter stated: “It is our chair, which we use. It is really pitiable and very banal, but it has a mood.”<sup>4</sup> In 1965, Richter created a small cycle of paintings of toilet paper rolls, each from a slightly different angle. It was in this period that he first experimented with painting press photographs as well as personal photographs, producing some of his most well known works such as *Woman with Umbrella* from 1964 and *Uncle Rudi* from 1965. In one of his earliest press photograph paintings, Richter painted an image from

1. An extensive history of the RAF can be found in Stefan Aust’s *Der Baader Meinhof Komplex* (Hamburg: Hoffmann und Campe, 1988). Baader-Meinhof.com also provides timelines and a detailed account of Germany’s Autumn.

2. Gerhard Richter, “Conversation with Jan Thorn Prikker concerning the cycle 18 October 1977, 1989,” *The Daily Practice of Painting: Writings 1962–1993*, ed. Hans-Ulrich Obrist, trans. David Britt (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1995), 186.

3. Richter, “Notes, 1964–1965,” in *The Daily Practice of Painting: Writings 1962–1993*, 35, 38.

4. Robert Storr, “Gerhard Richter: Forty Years of Painting,” *Gerhard Richter: Doubt and Belief in Painting* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2003), 53.

a newspaper of a man crushed by a large chunk of ice, adding thick letters at the top that spell out *Tote*.

The paintings from the early 1960s are not still life proper (Richter would explore this genre more directly later), but they could be understood as a type of still life, an approach to the everyday that Richter called “capitalist realism” and that I refer to as the “common object painting.” I’m taking this term from a 1962 *Artforum* article where John Coplans traced the chronology of “the common object and art” starting with Eugene Atget’s photographs of the banal urban image and ending with the English pop painters of the late 1950s.<sup>5</sup> That same year Walter Hopps curated an exhibition of early pop artists at the Pasadena Museum of Art entitled “New Painting of Common Objects.” Artists in the exhibition such as Ed Ruscha, Andy Warhol, and Wayne Theibaud were all experimenting with creating images of ordinary objects through photographic means.

By naming Richter’s early experimentation with photography “common object paintings” I hope to make a more direct link between these works and the tradition of the still life. The common object painting is a variation of the still life as it too depicts the mundane things that inhabit everyday life. Former drawing curator of the Museum of Modern Art, Margit Rowell describes the still life as a “contrived assemblage.” She explains that such works refract and magnify the quotidian.<sup>6</sup> The common object painting and the still life share an interest in the self-consciously constructed tableau. In place of a bowl of fruit, flowers, or a pitcher, are other overlooked objects—a toilet paper roll, a chandelier, an image taken from a newspaper.

In discussing the work of Cezanne, Meyer Shapiro suggests that the still life is a dead painting, empty of spirit. Consider his assessment:

It might be supposed that in still-life painting the meaning of the work is merely the sum of the denotations of the separate parts, while in paintings of action (history, myth, religion) to name the figure is still not to reach the sense of the whole; and that this arbitrariness in the assembly

5. John Coplans, “The New Paintings of Common Objects,” *Artforum* (November 1962): 26–29.

6. Margit Rowell, *Objects of Desire: The Modern Still Life* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1997), 23.

of still life objects accounts in a painting for the shallowness of spiritual content.<sup>7</sup>

Norman Bryson likewise defines the still life as a mode that stands in opposition to narrative and historical painting: “The law of narrative is one of change: characters move from episode to episode, from ignorance to knowledge . . . still life pitches itself at a level of material existence where nothing exceptional occurs: there is wholesale eviction of the Event.”<sup>8</sup>

Richter’s title, *Tote*, does not name Ulrike Meinhof as the figure in the painting; the event is anonymous. Outside of the context of the other works in the October cycle, she could be almost anyone. After all, the paintings, which are a part of German history, reside permanently in the Museum of Modern Art in New York City. Robert Storr, the curator at the time who worked to acquire the cycle, reads the series as history paintings, works that tell the grand narrative of the terrorist events of the 1970s in Germany.<sup>9</sup> But to believe that Richter’s painting of Ulrike Meinhof is wrapped up in storytelling is to see the image as an act of morality, of truth telling. Instead, Richter created a dead image, an image, like the still life, that is emptied of spiritual content, devoid of the myth. It is as inert and motionless as a round shiny apple in a bowl. As Richter has insisted, “these pictures possibly give rise to questions of political content or historical truth. Neither interests me in this instance.”<sup>10</sup> He also stated, “The political topicality of my

7. Meyer Shapiro, “Still Life and Cezanne,” *Modern Art: 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries* (New York: G. Braziller, 1978), 24.

8. Norman Bryson, “Xenia.” *Looking at the Overlooked: Four Essays on Still Life Painting* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1990), 61.

9. Storr, “Painting History—Painting Tragedy,” *Gerhard Richter: Doubt and Belief in Painting*, 250–63.

10. Richter, “Notes for a press conference, November-December 1988,” in *The Daily Practice of Painting: Writings 1962–1993*, 174.



Fig. 2: Stern, June 16, 1976.

October paintings means almost nothing to me.”<sup>11</sup> And finally, Richter’s maxim, “I believe in nothing.”<sup>12</sup> For Richter’s common object paintings, it is not the toilet paper roll or the chair, or even the dead body—rather, the object in the painting is the most common currency of image making: the photograph itself.

And so now, the photograph. What makes Richter’s image a dead image is its relationship to photography. In the case of *Tote*, Richter is not painting Meinhof’s figure as it appeared in the photograph, he is painting the photograph as it appeared in the news magazine. If Richter’s image is, indeed, a still life, it is a still life of the photographic function. And it is a deadly function. In his studies on photography Roland Barthes asserts that the “Death is the *eidos* of the photograph.”<sup>13</sup> In the click of the shutter, temporal reality is forever arrested. The camera is a clock for “seeing.” The sound of the click stops time, transforming the relation between the subject and the object: “I am neither subject nor object but a subject who feels he is becoming an object,” Barthes explained. “I then experience a micro-version of death (of parenthesis): I am truly becoming a specter.”<sup>14</sup> Within the time stop of the click, the subject changes; through the filter of the lens it is transposed into a common object.

“Photographs furnish evidence,” Susan Sontag has said.<sup>15</sup> Published in a news magazine, the image of Meinhof seemingly denotes a truth, the bare facts of a dead body. “A photograph is taken in order to inform,” Richter has said.<sup>16</sup> The Baader-Meinhof gang were widely photographed and featured in newspapers and magazines across Germany. Images from the popular magazine *Der Spiegel* show black and white police photographs of the terrorists, a surveillance photo of Gundrun Ennslin being transferred to different locations, and a snapshot of Andreas Baader in his jail cell.<sup>17</sup> There is a straightforward, matter-of-fact quality to the photographs.

One article is framed by two significant photographs; the first shows a young, pretty Urlike Meinhof as an intellectual, standing in front of a bookcase, cigarette in hand. “Columnist Urlike Meinhof,” the caption reads, “lived a false life.” The photograph below the article depicts a changed Meinhof, a struggling Meinhof, hair shorn and in prison garb, as two

11. Richter, “Notes for a press conference, November-December 1988,” 175.

12. *Ibid.*, 35.

13. Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), 15.

14. *Ibid.*, 14.

15. Susan Sontag, “In Plato’s Cave,” *On Photography* (New York: Picador, 1973), 5.

16. Richter, “Notes, 1964–1965,” 31.

17. See *Der Spiegel*, July 5, 1976; February 2, 1972; June 1972.

prison officials pull at her. “Terrorist Meinhof,” the caption reads, “her skin stretched.”<sup>18</sup> These spectacular images stand as warnings to the German public, a warning of the power of ideology to transform a socialized person into an anarchist savage. The photos act as propaganda, spurning the exploitative desire to understand where an ordinary person goes wrong, how a decent life leads to suicide.

Sontag also said, “All photographs are memento mori.”<sup>19</sup> The painting that starts Richter’s October cycle is an image of a young Meinhof. It is the only painting in the cycle that depicts one of the terrorists prior to his or her RAF activity. The work entitled *Youth Portrait* is an image that was also published in *Der Spiegel*.<sup>20</sup> The painting is anonymous; this could be any young woman. Yet the photograph is specific; naming exists in captioning. Unlike Meinhof looks innocently at the camera, a young bourgeoisie.

If a photograph of a living person renders a type of objective turning to death, what of the photograph of the dead? A photograph of Meinhof dead on an examining table was published in *Stern* in a June 16, 1976 editorial examining her suicide. The up-close police photograph is slightly different than Richter’s painting. In the photograph her head hangs off the table; the cut of the bed sheet is clear around her neck. The headline states “That Everyone Screams for a Solution.” The photograph, placed in this editorial context, makes clear that Richter’s rendering is not just a painting of a common object, a photograph, but of a particular photograph, one that was published in a widely distributed news magazine. It is a photograph that holds collective catharsis, a cultural currency: Where were you when Ulrike Meinhof hanged herself?

Gerhard Richter was grieving. Or at least he was some ten years later, in 1988, when he completed the cycle: “Deadly reality, inhuman reality. Our rebellion. Impotence. Failure. Death. That is why I painted these pictures.”<sup>21</sup> It was in this period that Richter also began experimenting with more traditional forms of the still life. In 1983, prior to starting the October cycle, Richter began painting still lifes in the vanitas tradition, a style similar to the memento mori. The vanitas form of the still life was primarily developed in seventeenth-century Northern Europe and features objects such as books, mirrors, skulls and candles that traditionally symbolically represent the

18. These images come from an untitled article on Meinhof in *Der Spiegel* (May 17, 1976): 23.

19. Sontag, 15.

20. See *Der Spiegel* (November 1977): 52.

21. Richter, “Notes for a press conference, November–December 1988,” 175.

fleeting nature of time, earthly life, the transience of beauty and youth. In Latin, “vanitas” translates into “emptiness.” The term frequently appears in Ecclesiastes in the Bible. The verse “Vanitas vanitatum omnia vanitas” in the Latin version of the Bible is translated in the King James Bible as “Vanity of vanities; all is vanity.” The New International Version of the Bible translates this same passage as “Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless.” This translation recalls Richter’s own assessment of bad pictures: “Pictures which are interpretable and which contain a meaning, are bad pictures. A picture presents itself as the unmanageable, the illogical, the meaningless.”<sup>22</sup>

Like the traditional vanitas, Richter experimented with the same arrangement of objects. Using photographs as source material, he realistically depicted a series of skulls and burning candles. Scholars have claimed that Richter’s interest in the still life in the period of his development of the October cycle, such as a series of photographs of apples from 1988 that are published in Richter’s *Atlas*, acted as a respite from the difficult series, or as easy meditations that allowed him to breathe during the difficult process of rendering the October works. I would argue that such images, the photographs of apples and the slightly earlier vanitas paintings, acted as studies or as a strategy for Richter in learning how to detail Germany’s autumn. The trope of the still life, a trope seemingly emptied of content, allowed Richter the ability to address the event, a way in which to deal with his grief.

In Richard Schiff’s study on the October cycle, he claims that Richter’s paintings may just as well be titled “Grief.” Schiff quotes Richter making a distinction between the photograph and the painting: “I’d say the photograph provokes horror, and [my] painting with the same motif something more like grief.” Schiff suggests that the paintings “touch the entire human condition, not just the particular facts of the situation.” Schiff continues, “When asked toward what his grief is directed, Richter replies: ‘that it is the way it is.’ He is grieving at human nature.”<sup>23</sup> That is, it is a common emotion, grief, and it can be attached to any number of catastrophic events, both public and personal.

The photographs of apples, his earlier vanitas, and the common object paintings from the 1960s allowed Richter a

22. Richter, “Notes, 1964–1965,” 35.

23. Richard Schiff, “Eine Amerikanisierung deutscher Kunst,” trans. Jürgen Blasius, in Cornelia Homburg, ed., *German Art: Deutsche Kunst aus amerikanischer Sicht* (Cologne: DuMont, 2004), 24

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way to paint the unpaintable. The affectless and banal form of the still life provided a strategy in detailing the disillusionment of our German Autumn. The failure of ideology is a failure we all share. Shiff states, “people of all kinds become irrationally destructive because of adherence to belief, ideology.”<sup>24</sup> Unlike Meinhof, reflected through the relationship between the press photograph and Richter’s painting, comes to represent simultaneously the power and the illusion of ideology, the meaningless reality of a life ended in suicide. Dead, on the examining table, she becomes anti heroic, common, another stilled life. ■

24. Shiff, 24.