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18. Oktober 1977: Gerhard Richter's Work of Mourning and Its New Audience

Author(s): Rainer Usselman

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## Prelude

In *Mourning and Melancholia*, Sigmund Freud describes mourning as:

The reaction to the loss of a loved person, or to the loss of some abstraction which has taken the place of one, such as one's country, liberty, an ideal, and so on. [The work of mourning sets in when] reality-testing has shown that the loved object no longer exists, and it proceeds to demand that all libido shall be withdrawn from its attachments to that object. . . . Nevertheless its orders cannot be obeyed at once. They are carried out bit by bit, at great expense of time and cathectic energy, and in the meantime the existence of the lost object is psychically prolonged. Each single one of the memories and expectations in which the libido is bound to the object is brought up and hypocathected, and detachment of the libido is accomplished in respect of it. . . . The fact is, however, that when the work of mourning is completed the ego becomes free and uninhibited again.<sup>1</sup>

In 1999, eleven years after Gerhard Richter's *18.Oktober 1977* paintings were first exhibited, their cathectic energy had become exhausted—so much so that the presence of these extraordinary pictures was no longer regarded a necessity in Germany. The fifteen canvases commemorate the imprisonment and death in 1977 of members of the radical Baader-Meinhof group, who were convicted of acts of terrorism in what was then West Germany. It should come as no surprise that Richter's work of mourning, which so beautifully expresses the painful and

tragic complicity of perpetrators and victims, should have become dislocated and removed, both literally and figuratively, from the place where the incidents occurred. And why not? A generation after the terrible events of 1977, the leaden years of the *Deutscher Herbst* (the German Autumn, as the terrorist period is known) seem more distant than ever.

When the great German painter sold the series to the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1995, many spoke of a significant loss for Germany, since *18.Oktober 1977* was then regarded as a work of national significance. Unfortunately, German institutions were neither able nor willing to match the \$3 million offered by MoMA. Originally on loan to the

Museum für Moderne Kunst in Frankfurt until December 31, 2000, Richter's paintings were shipped to New York ahead of plan on May 3, 1999. The time to let go of a powerful political document had indeed come early. A question, remains, however. Now that these difficult paintings, which are so firmly grounded in recent German history have American residency, how will their American audience receive them?

Rainer Usselmann

## ***18.Oktober 1977:* Gerhard Richter's Work of Mourning and Its New Audience**

### I. Distance

The title *18.Oktober 1977* mystifies. Will visitors to MoMA know what makes this date so special, worthy of receiving homage in a series of paintings? Will they understand this body of work as a nonspecific attempt to attest to the transience of existence, very much like On Kawara's installations and *Date* paintings. The power and resonance that illuminates from a single date can amplify our sense of community and social experience. Beyond the margins of our own dominant

1. Sigmund Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia" (1917), in Angela Richards and Albert Dickson, eds., *On Metapsychology: The Theory of Psychoanalysis*, Penguin Freud Library, vol.11 (London: Penguin, 1984), 251–53.

culture, however, a date is just a date: suggestive in its anonymity at best and its meaninglessness at worst.<sup>2</sup> It is the extraordinary elusiveness of the *Oktober* paintings that puzzles; they have an elusiveness that contradicts the matter-of-factness of their titles. They evade our attempts to take control and extract a narrative, make references, or create allusions. The references and allusions on which the works depend are corded-off—shrouded in a grey fog, they seem distant and opaque. Richter's signature blur dissolves the spatial relation among viewer, painted surface, and pictorial depth, undermining our confidence in the certainties of perception. Viewers may try to step closer to the surface of each canvas in search of clues. Yet their only discovery may be the painterly materiality of the *grisaille*, which bathes the works in a luscious shimmer. Or viewers may step back, tilting their heads and squinting, trying to impart more clarity to these images, until gently pushed on by an eager crowd. Or, perhaps, they might just stand back in awe and let the solemnity of the pictures radiate diffuse, quasi-religious sentiments of suffering and retribution. It is their impenetrable presence that seems to spoil efforts to investigate what lies behind these theatrical works with their undramatic titles. Yet to conclude that Richter's *Oktober* paintings remain incomprehensible for their new audience is perhaps premature. Are the canvases nothing but a beautifully crafted testimony to an encounter with death? What information can viewers gather by solely concentrating on these paintings? And where could they start?

Richter refers to the *Oktober* paintings as a cycle without a beginning or an end. The point of departure depends on the spatial environment since access might occur at any point in the cycle, as could the exit. The arrangement of the work in the Museum für Moderne Kunst in Frankfurt offered no guidance as to the proposed direction of one's gaze. The seemingly random sequence compounded the difficulty of unearthing the linearity of a tragic narrative. We could start with the sentimental *Jugendbildnis* (*Youth Portrait*), which portrays a young woman, or with the ambiguous *Beerdigung* (*Funeral*), or even with the silent *Plattenspieder* (*Record Player*). A look into Richter's catalogue raisonné, with its rigorous numerical archiving system, reveals some sort of intentionality as to the sequence of the work. Following his system, the starting point of the *Oktober* cycle could be the three-part painting simply called *Tote* (*Dead*), which shows in profile "three times the head" of a dead woman "after they cut her down."<sup>3</sup> We could then move on to *Erhängte* (*Hanged*)—a near-abstract representation of an interior space with a figure that seems to be hovering by a window—and the two *Erschossener* (*Man Shot Down*) paintings, where we discern a male figure lying on the floor with his left arm extended. Next would be *Zelle* (*Cell*), a fiercely smudged view of a room with floor-to-ceiling bookcases, *Gegenuestellung* (*Confrontation*) 1, 2, and 3, in which a female figure appears through a mist of grey and—in a filmlike sequence—smiles and turns away, then *Youth Portrait*, and *Record Player*. Completing the cycle are *Funeral* and, finally, the two *Festnahme* (*Arrest*) pictures, which are exceedingly difficult to decipher: two versions of an urban exterior, depicted from a high vantage point, with a few buildings and the silhouettes of parked cars.

To be sure, the titles of the paintings could provide some anchorage and steer the inquiry away from a purely phenomenological reading since they seem to suggest that there is a meaning, a hidden agenda. But no further clues are

2. At times, due to the metaphoric significance of the event, a date can become emblematic to a truly global scale. The trauma of September 11, 2001 has become ingrained in our collective subconscious irrespective of cultural boundaries.

3. Gerhard Richter with Hans-Ulrich Obrist, ed. *Gerhard Richter: The Daily Practice of Painting—Writings 1962–1993* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1995), 175.

given, and the images appear strangely emptied. Names such as *Confrontation* or *Man Shot Down* help ground the scenes somewhat, but they ultimately mystify and confuse even more: although evocations of a narrative are there, the evidence is hidden from view, covered by layers of grey.

The allusions Richter conjures up but declines to analyze in his *Oktober* paintings rely upon the mediation of the camera. By copying photographic originals, which had been widely available in the German news media at the time, he manages to partake in what Roland Barthes calls photography's *noème*, its "having-been-there." He effectively subverts Barthes's dictum that "painting can feign reality without having seen it."<sup>4</sup> Richter's *Oktober* paintings are explicitly grounded in the gaze of the camera; they draw on its putative testimony; they *have* seen the unspeakable; they claim to bear witness. However, as a promise made but never kept, historicity is called upon but never fully realized. Through the use of photographic signifiers, a certain facticity is palpable, yet the work remains obscured. Viewers may gaze, but they can never grasp; they may only catch a glimpse of some terrible truth from a distance. It is as if an extraordinary aura shielded these paintings from a penetrating, critical gaze. In "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," Walter Benjamin describes the phenomenon of distance as a prerequisite for aura. For him, the definition of aura as a

'unique phenomenon of a distance however close it may be' represents nothing but the formulation of the cult value of the work of art in categories of space and time perception. Distance is the opposite of closeness. The essentially distant object is the unapproachable one. Unapproachability is indeed a major quality of the cult image. True to its nature, it remains 'distant, however close it may be.'<sup>5</sup>

Richter, then, creates with photographic and painterly means an aura of existential profundity, which conditions the reading of these paintings in a very particular way. The impressions of weight and solemnity that have been ascribed to the series are in part contingent upon that aura. In addition, the institutional framework inevitably amplifies the auratic quality of the canvases by staging them as unique masterpieces, contrary to the status of Richter's source material, that of mass-media news photographs. Significantly, however, those photographs, which were so much a part of the collective German psyche some twenty-five years ago, are all but unknown to a large audience outside of Germany.

No doubt, Richter's *Oktober* images are carriers of an unspeakable truth. But contemporary viewers may have to look elsewhere to uncover what the paintings alone fail to communicate. The contrast between evasive grisaille, and suggested historical facticity creates a sense of unease, which invites speculation on a dark episode but fails to spell things out. The knowledgeable *flâneur* may look at *Record Player* as just another Richter photo painting, executed with the same mocking virtuosity as, say, his *Loo Roll* series of 1965. Germans and some viewers, however, know that these images are different—*Record Player*, the record player, and that date, October 18, 1977. One feels compelled to exclaim, *Don't you know what happened?*

## II. Deutscher Herbst

At five minutes past midnight on Tuesday, October 18, 1977, stun grenades detonate outside the cockpit window of a Lufthansa Boeing 737 "Landshut," emergency

4. Barthes' use of this term goes back to the Greek word *noêma*, meaning: an enigmatic concept, obscure and subtle speech. Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, trans. Richard Howard (London: Vintage Books, 1993), 76,92.

5. Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" in Hannah Arendt, ed. *Illuminations* (Glasgow: Fontana, 1992 [1936]), 236–237.

exits burst open and men with blackened faces leap forward and storm the plane, screaming and shooting. Within minutes, Operation Feuerzauber is over.

The Lufthansa jet was parked on a runway of Somalia's Mogadishu International Airport. It had been hijacked four days earlier on its scheduled flight from Palma de Mallorca to Frankfurt by a group of Palestinian terrorists in an attempt to press for the release from prison of four convicted members of the Baader-Meinhof organization. Under the cover of ongoing negotiations with the hijackers about the imminent release of the prisoners, a special commando unit of the West German border police (GSG 9) had managed to close in on the plane and attack. At thirty-eight minutes past midnight, the first news bulletin on German radio acknowledged the successful raid in the Somali capital. All eighty-six hostages had been freed, and three of the four terrorists were killed in the operation.

The spectacular showdown with the West German state apparatus had not gone according to plan. The hijacking of the Lufthansa jet had been conceived of as the push that would finally force the German government to its knees since it had shown no willingness to release the prisoners in exchange for the kidnapped president of the Federal Association of German Employers, Hans-Martin Schleyer. But this plan exposed the delusional character of the Baader-Meinhof project itself. The State was not going to give in, and the struggle of the "six against the sixty million" (as novelist Heinrich Böll characterized it) was nearing its tragic conclusion.<sup>6</sup> What followed in the Night of Stammheim has been extensively examined, yet doubts remain. Three of the Baader-Meinhof inmates on the seventh floor of the Stuttgart-Stammheim high-security prison were found dead or dying, and a fourth lay injured, a few hours after the Mogadishu raid had taken place. Prison officers, making their rounds with breakfast rations, discovered the bodies of Gudrun Ensslin, hanged with a loudspeaker cable, and Andreas Baader, shot in the back of the neck. Jan-Carl Raspe had severe head injuries from a gunshot wound and was barely alive. Irmgard Möller had multiple stab wounds. Raspe died the same day, and only Möller survived.<sup>7</sup>

Just how large quantities of explosives and guns had found their way into the high-security prison in Stuttgart and into the cells of the Baader-Meinhof inmates was never answered conclusively. In spite of immediate strenuous efforts by the West German authorities to dispel any suspicion over the violent deaths, the many inconsistencies in the police report gave rise to unnerving speculation: murder or suicide, state execution or final act of defiance?

The next day, Schleyer was found dead in the trunk of a car after a terrorist communiqué revealing his whereabouts had been published in the French daily *La Libération*. He had been shot execution style since, with the deaths of the Stammheim inmates, there was no longer a case to be negotiated.

On October 25, in a state funeral, Schleyer's body was laid to rest in his native Stuttgart. And finally, on October 27, 1977, the bodies of Baader, Ensslin, and Raspe were interred in a communal grave also in a Stuttgart cemetery. A tragic episode came to an end with two funerals that could hardly have been more different. Although they took place in close proximity to one another: one, a widely televised grandiose display of a country in mourning, with its pomp and circumstance (Federal President Walter Scheel apologized publicly to the family on behalf of the government for not having saved Schleyer's life); the other, a

6. See Heinrich Böll "Will Ulrike Gnade oder freies Geleit?" *Der Spiegel*, week 2, Hamburg, 1972, p. 52. The article caused great controversy since Böll criticized the state for its failure to offer a more conciliatory approach toward the Baader-Meinhof group. Since then, he was one of the most prominent public figures to be branded a *Sympathisant*, a terrorist sympathiser.

7. Ulrike Meinhof had been found dead in Stammheim some eighteen months earlier, hanged from the wire-mesh cover of her prison-cell window. A team of coroners returned a "death by suicide" verdict, which was angrily rejected by members of the radical Left. Another key member of the group, Holger Meins, had died of starvation during a hunger strike in prison in 1974. Pieter H. Bakker Schut, Stammheim: *Bundesvorstand Rote Hilfe*, eds. (Bonn: Pahl-Rugenstein, 1997).



***Dead (Tote), 1988. From October 18, 1977.***  
**Oil on canvas. 24½ x 28¾ in. (62 x 73 cm).**  
**The Museum of Modern Art. Purchase.**  
**Photograph © 2001 The Museum of**  
**Modern Art, New York.**



***Dead (Tote), 1988. From October 18, 1977.***  
**Oil on canvas. 24½ x 24½ in. (62 x 62 cm).**  
**The Museum of Modern Art. Purchase.**  
**Photograph © 2001 The Museum of**  
**Modern Art, New York.**



***Dead (Tote)*, 1988. From *October 18, 1977*.  
Oil on canvas. 13¼ x 15½ in. (35 x 40 cm).  
The Museum of Modern Art. Purchase.  
Photograph © 2001 The Museum of  
Modern Art, New York.**

***Hanged (Erhängte)*, 1988. From *October 18,*  
*1977*. Oil on canvas. 6 ft. 7 in. x 55 in. (201 x  
140 cm). The Museum of Modern Art.  
Purchase. Photograph © 2001 The Museum  
of Modern Art, New York.**





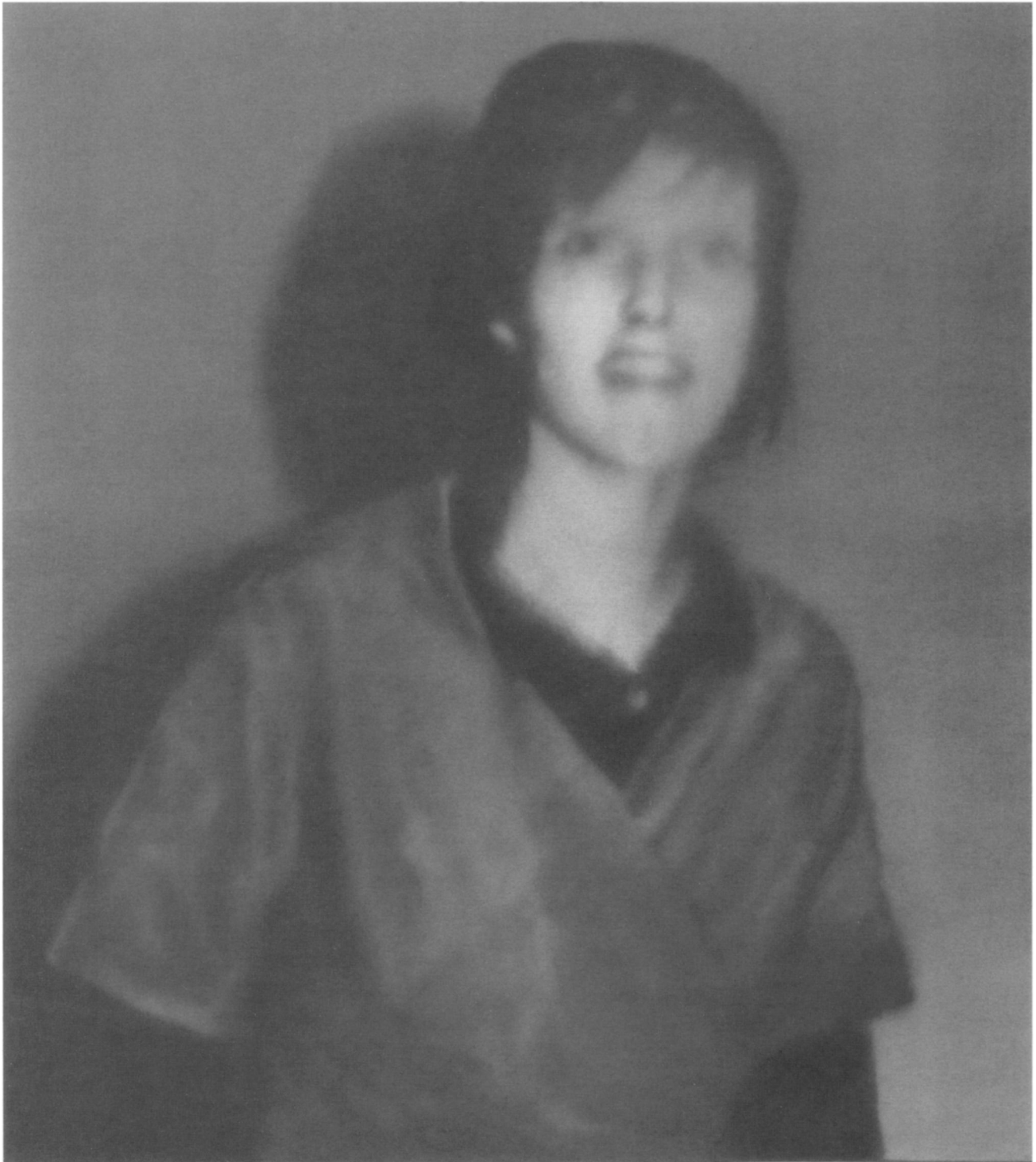


***Man Shot Down I (Erschossener I)*, 1988.  
From *October 18, 1977*. Oil on canvas. 39½ x  
55¼ in. (100.5 x 140.5 cm). The Museum of  
Modern Art. Purchase. Photograph © 2001  
The Museum of Modern Art, New York.**



***Man Shot Down 2 (Erschossener 2), 1918.***  
**From *October 18, 1917*. Oil on canvas. 39½ x**  
**55¼ in. (100.5 x 140.5 cm). The Museum of**  
**Modern Art. Purchase. Photograph © 2001**  
**The Museum of Modern Art, New York.**





**Cell (Zelle), 1988. From *October 18, 1977*.  
Oil on canvas. 6 ft. 7 in. x 55 in. (201 x 140  
cm). The Museum of Modern Art.  
Purchase. Photograph © 2001 The Museum  
of Modern Art, New York.**

**Confrontation I (Gegenüberstellung I), 1988.  
From *October 18, 1977*. Oil on canvas. 44 x  
40 in. (112 x 102 cm). The Museum of  
Modern Art. Purchase. Photograph © 2001  
The Museum of Modern Art, New York.**



***Confrontation 2 (Gegenüberstellung 2)*, 1988.  
From *October 18, 1977*. Oil on canvas. 44 x  
40¼ in. (112 x 102 cm). The Museum of  
Modern Art. Purchase. Photograph © 2001  
The Museum of Modern Art, New York.**

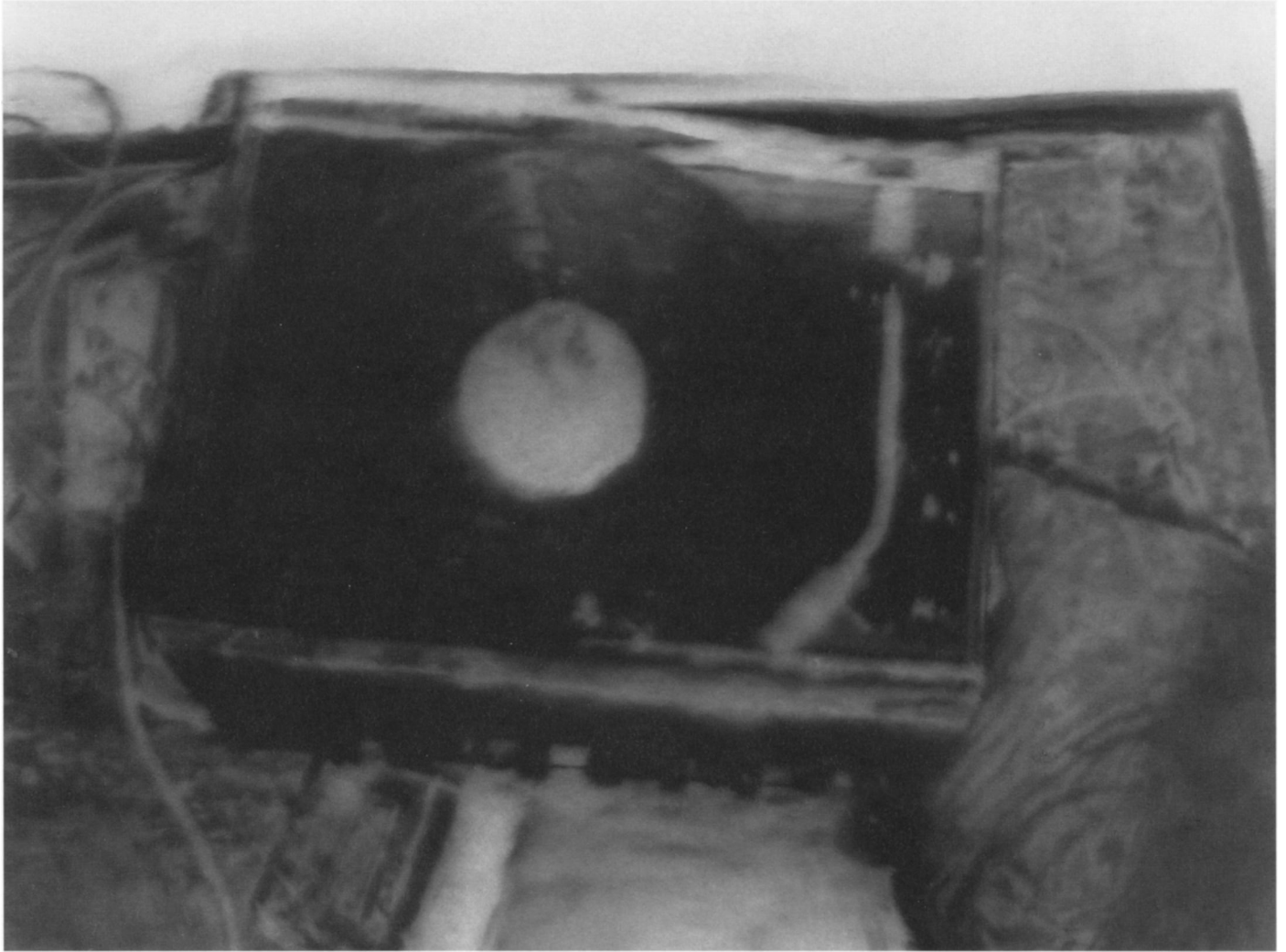


**Confrontation 3 (Gegenüberstellung 3), 1988.**  
From *October 18, 1977*. Oil on canvas. 44 x  
40¼ in. (112 x 102 cm). The Museum of  
Modern Art. Purchase. Photograph © 2001  
The Museum of Modern Art, New York.



**Youth Portrait (*Jugendbildnis*), 1988. From  
October 18, 1977. Oil on canvas. 28 $\frac{1}{2}$  x 24 $\frac{1}{2}$   
in. (72.4 x 62 cm). The Museum of Modern  
Art. Purchase. Photograph © 2001 The  
Museum of Modern Art, New York.**





**Record Player (Plattenspieler), 1988. From  
October 18, 1977. Oil on canvas. 24 $\frac{1}{4}$  x 32 $\frac{1}{4}$   
in. (62 x 83 cm). The Museum of Modern  
Art. Purchase. Photograph © 2001 The  
Museum of Modern Art, New York.**



***Funeral (Beerdigung)*, 1988. From *October 18, 1977*. Oil on canvas. 6 ft. 6¼ in. x 10 ft. 6 in. (2 x 3.2 m). The Museum of Modern Art. Purchase. Photograph © 2001 The Museum of Modern Art, New York.**



**Arrest I (Festnahme I), 1988. From October 18, 1977. Oil on canvas. 36½ x 49¼ in. (92 x 126.5 cm). The Museum of Modern Art. Purchase. Photograph © 2001 The Museum of Modern Art, New York.**



**Arrest 2 (Festnahme 2), 1988. From October 18, 1977. Oil on canvas. 36¼ x 49¼ in. (92 x 126.5 cm). The Museum of Modern Art. Purchase. Photograph © 2001 The Museum of Modern Art, New York.**

demonstration of defiance, deviance, and anger with many of the hundreds of funeral guests and sympathizers, masked in balaclavas, and the whole crowd was under surveillance by thousands of armed police officers. Had it not been for the intervention of Stuttgart's mayor, Manfred Rommel, the second funeral might have taken place on a municipal rubbish heap, as demanded by an outraged public.

The murder and bombing spree of the Baader-Meinhof group, which was the Red Army Faction (RAF), did not come to an end in the October days of the German Autumn. Indeed, many more assassinations and bombings followed until, in April 1998, the last generation of the RAF published a communiqué declaring that the project was finished. The events of October 1977 marked a traumatic incision in West German postwar history. What had begun in the late 1960s as a student protest against the Vietnam War, the latent renazification of West German public life, and neoauthoritarian tendencies in the cultural and economic establishment reached a watershed in the Night of Stammheim. Both sides had increased their stakes in a lethal confrontation. RAF terrorists had shown their willingness to kill indiscriminately, confusing those in positions of power (Schleyer) with those, according to their own ideology of class warfare, at the receiving end of the state apparatus (the "innocent," mainly working-class vacationers on the Lufthansa jet). The Social Democratic government of Chancellor Helmut Schmidt had accepted the possibility of a massive loss of life and was resolutely determined not to give any ground and release the prisoners. In this final stance, we can thus discern the elements of an emblematic failure, the end of hope for a utopian project, a sense of loss.

The departure of members of the radical Left into illegality and "armed struggle" in 1970 had still carried with it the vague hopes of a sizeable portion of the younger generation.<sup>8</sup> The subsequent audacity and courage with which they managed to evade the police, often in high-speed car chases, had earned the Baader-Meinhof group the status of iconic notoriety. Yet the state apparatus had been challenged in earnest and began to hit back. The police and the judiciary received big budget increases, electronic surveillance was added to the state's arsenal, and countless far-reaching emergency bills that restricted civil liberties were passed in Parliament. The idealistic liberalization of German politics, initiated by Chancellor Willy Brandt in the early 1970s, had given way to an increasing heavy-handedness in the wake of terrorist activities. By 1977, the mood had changed: the heady days of Brandt's "more democracy" campaign which was supported by many members of West Germany's cultural and intellectual elite, were over. Numerous West German intellectuals, writers, scientists, and filmmakers who had willingly campaigned for Brandt's Social Democratic Party (SPD) found themselves on the receiving end of the "state-monopoly of force."<sup>9</sup> He or she who failed unequivocally to denounce terrorist activities was eagerly branded a sympathizer. The sentiment of the public majority, kept up to date by the newspapers and magazines published by an agitating Springer Press, was belligerent and uncompromising. Language itself helped identify possible deviants: Baader-Meinhof Group or Baader-Meinhof Gang, for or against, terrorist or law-abiding German?

And yet, the unfathomable events of the German Autumn made possible an experience of collective grief and mourning. The funerals in Stuttgart, two days

8. In an opinion poll in March 1971, Germans were asked whether they would give shelter to a member of the Baader-Meinhof group for one night. Five percent said yes, and 9 percent were undecided. In the 16–29 age group, 10 percent said yes, and 11 percent were undecided. In effect, 20 percent of Germans in the 16–29 age group would at least consider aiding the Baader-Meinhof group. Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann, ed. *The Germans: Public Opinion Polls, 1967–1980*. (Westport 1981), 67.

9. Electronic surveillance devices used in the home of the leading West German physicist Dr. Klaus Traube in 1976 gained the most notoriety, when shown almost a year later in *Der Spiegel*.

and a few miles apart, had to be seen as two halves of the same whole. For a few moments, it seemed, the entire nation was horrified, aghast at the irreversible certainty of death itself. Both victims and perpetrators had to pay with their lives for their antagonistic positions in a sociocultural conflict that was in actuality situated outside their own spheres. The ideological struggle that had made personal what was essentially public had turned out to be a tragic failure. The project of a more open, democratic, and progressive society in West Germany had failed in its wake, too. In a traumatic funeral rite, the hope for an ideal and the possibility of change had come to an end.

### III. Allegory and the Work of Mourning

The British critic Amanda Sebestyen concluded in a 1989 review of the first London exhibition of *18.Oktober 1977*: “You could know none of this [the historical context] from the ICA’s presentation of these pictures, or from the most painful scrutiny of the exhibition catalogue. In Germany, just to commemorate those who have become non-persons was probably enough—the facts that had been suppressed remained in the minds of the watchers. But in London these pictures have been locked in an art historical deep-freeze.”<sup>10</sup> It seems as if these paintings can only make sense to a non-German audience when the exhibiting institution provides a second text, some sort of historical *Überbau* or superstructure. Only then can these impenetrable works be opened up and access to a concise reading be made available. As much as the initial reaction to the *Oktober* cycle may well be one of bafflement, the *Überbau* can easily provide the necessary support structure. With none provided, however, the historic significance of *18.Oktober 1977* will inevitably get lost in a haze of intangible unease.

If *18.Oktober 1977* can only truly be understood through a supplementary text; if the pictures otherwise become freefloating adding up to no discernible narrative, though they might suggest fragments of one—we are, according to Benjamin, faced with an allegory. In *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, he posits that the allegorist functions as a translator-mediator who provides access to an otherwise closed-off meaning. The uncertain sense of historicity, or aura, is only revealed by the making available hints and clues, which, together with the work itself, connect to a—however fragmentary—reading. The work itself

. . . is incapable of emanating any meaning or significance of its own: such significance as it has, it acquires from the allegorist. He places it within it, and stands behind it—not in a psychological but in an ontological sense. In his hands the object becomes something different; through it he speaks of something different and for him it becomes a key to the realm of hidden knowledge; and he reveres it as an emblem of this.<sup>11</sup>

In “The Allegorical Impulse: Toward a Theory of Postmodernism,” Craig Owens observes that allegory occurs when “one text is read through another.” He continues: “Allegorical imagery is appropriated imagery; the allegorist does not invent images but confiscates them. He lays claim to the culturally significant, poses as its interpreter.” Owens identifies further traits of allegory, such as its capacity to “rescue from historical oblivion that which threatens to disappear” and its ability to function “in the gap between a present and a past which, without allegorical reinterpretation, might have remained foreclosed.”<sup>12</sup>

10. Amanda Sebestyen, “The Uncivil Dead” *Society and New Statesman* 9 January, 1989. repro. in Ulrich Wilmes ed., *Gerhard Richter: October 18, 1977—Presseberichte* (Cologne: Walther König, 1989), 88.

11. Walter Benjamin, “Allegory and Trauerspiel” (1928), in *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* (London: Verso, 1998), 183–184.

12. Craig Owens, “The Allegorical Impulse: Toward a Theory of Postmodernism” (1980) in Scott Bryson, Barbara Kruger, Lynne Tillman, and Jane Weinstock, eds., *Beyond Recognition—Representation, Power, and Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 52–54.

It would be wrong, however, to conclude that Richter's series is intrinsically allegorical. This would be the case if the *Überbau* of the *Oktober* paintings was made available or at least accessible within the work itself. Richter is no allegorist; on the contrary, he obstructs the making of meaning, offering no more than a hint of historicity. Due to their refusal to communicate, Richter's images can be accessed only through an allegorical discourse, which is solely dependent on the institutional context in which they are displayed.

During the first North American tour of the *Oktober* cycle in 1990–91, extensive information had to be provided to help the public overcome the opacity of Richter's paintings and understand their historical grounding. For example, the catalogue that accompanied the exhibition *Open Ends*, which opened at the Museum of Modern Art in November 2000, offered some much-needed clues.<sup>13</sup> Just how will these pictures continue to fare in future exhibitions? As time goes by, the need for an *Überbau* will no doubt increase. Since their status as signifiers of a specific historicity will fade inevitably, the significance of the *Oktober* paintings may come to rest in a realm of universal abstractness, where they can conjure up quasi-religious sentiments about human injustice, suffering, and death. Benjamin even went as far as stating that "allegories become dated, because it is part of their nature to shock."<sup>14</sup> But what if these extraordinary canvases transcended the traumatic events of the *Deutscher Herbst*? What if, in their new surroundings, they were to take on a new role? Perhaps they could continue to realize their allegorical essence and become emblematic of the kinds of tragic breakdowns that inevitably occur before rebels become perpetrators and innocents become victims. Perhaps, dislocated as they are now from their original *telos*, Richter's *Oktober* cycle could continue to release cathartic energies and be transformed into a nonspecific work of mourning. In a society that is marked by ever-more-frequent outbursts of violence, by murder and state executions, this role could not be more appropriate. Could Richter's work not mourn the loss of humanity, the absence of mercy, and the depth of hatred that so often scar our condition? Could we all not mourn, together, the fate of the anonymous death-row inmate or the senseless killing of loved ones as we have been mourning our failings in the Baader-Meinhof trauma?

If the *18.Oktober 1977* paintings succeed in opening up to a new audience Richter's great work of mourning may be, contrary to Freud's assertion, ongoing. In that case, we will not begrudge the loss of such significant paintings, but will celebrate that which makes us understand and reach out to one another: a shared sense of what it is to be human.

Rainer Usselman lectures in photography and media arts at the Arts Institute in Bournemouth and the Surrey Institute of Art and Design, England.

13. Robert Storr, *Gerhard Richter: October 18, 1977* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2001).

14. Benjamin, "Allegory and Trauerspiel," 183–84.