# Gerhard Richter's *Stations of the Cross*: On Martyrdom and Memory in Postwar German Art

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> Art is wretched, cynical, stupid, helpless, confusing – a mirror-image of our own spiritual impoverishment, our state of forsakenness and loss. We have lost the great ideas, the Utopias; we have lost all faith, everything that creates meaning.
>
> Gerhard Richter, 13 January 1988

> What have I painted. Three times Baader, shot. Three times Ensslin, hanged. Three times the head of the dead Meinhof after they cut her down. Once the dead Meins. Three times Ensslin, neutral (almost like pop stars). Then a big, unspecific burial – a cell dominated by a bookcase – a silent, grey record player – a youthful portrait of Meinhof, sentimental in a bourgeois way – twice the arrest of Meins, forced to surrender to the clenched power of the State. All the pictures are dull, grey, mostly very blurred, diffuse. Their presence is the horror and the hard-to-bear refusal to answer, to explain, to give an opinion.
>
> Gerhard Richter, 7 December 1988

The words, notes, are Gerhard Richter's. Reprinted in the collection of his interviews and writings, *The Daily Practice of Painting*, they stand as bookends to a set of paintings created in the months that divide them.[1] Words of deep despair, a litany of loss, the first passage suggests a moment of artistic standstill, or at least, of restiveness. Their melancholic, pessimistic, even nihilistic tone certainly does not foretell the display of extraordinary artistic concentration and productivity that instead follows in the wake of their conception and inscription. But we know, if we know Richter's work and writings, that such productivity and concentration is to be expected, that such despair stands in a dialectical relationship with hope, even belief. We know that for Richter, the very activity, and moreover, possibility of painting stands precisely in an encounter with and acknowledgement of its inadequacy, incommensurability and failure. We know that it is out of this condition, one that need not, and indeed should not, be understood simply as the postmodern, that his painting emerges. We know that it is with this act, an act that is at once an avowal and a disavowal of painting and its limits, that his painting is constituted. We know that it is the loss of possibility, the loss, in some sense, of the former project of painting, the former project of historical modernism, in all of its utopianism, that at once impedes and impels Richter's own painterly enterprise.[2]

What we do not know, or are not always charged to think about, is the larger context in which Richter's project takes shape. We are not made to consider the ways in which the situation with which Richter grapples is not only, or not always, of an artistic order, but rather, of a historical order, one in which painting must contend not only with its history, but our own. Certainly, if we are invested in an art-historical enterprise in which painting is understood to be inextricably located in the circumstances and situation of its production, it is tempting to position

1. Hans-Ulrich Obrist (ed.), *Gerhard Richter: The Daily Practice of Painting. Writings and Interviews, 1962–1993* (MIT Press: Cambridge, MA; Anthony d'Offay Gallery: London, 1995), pp. 171, 175.

2. It is from the work of Benjamin Buchloh and, most recently and expansively, Robert Storr, and his retrospective exhibition and catalogue *Gerhard Richter: Forty Years of Painting* (Museum of Modern Art: New York, 2002) that such a dialectical understanding of Richter's work has emerged.

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Richter's entire painterly practice against the backdrop of history, writ large. It is tempting to produce an account of his project that forces it up against the legacy of historical trauma that so structures contemporaneous postwar German culture, and that, in certain isolated instances – *Uncle Rudi, Atlas* – Richter takes as his manifest subject.

However, if we are to begin to think about the relationship of Richter's painting to history, to historical loss, to historical trauma, we must look to those moments when history does not simply appear as an identifiable object of painting, but, rather, when its traces adhere and persist as its structuring and sustaining subject. And it is to that end that I have paired the two passages from Richter's writings with which I began. For the two passages frame, at the same time that they describe, more or less directly, the production of a major cycle of paintings, paintings that we might call, if only as a point of departure, history paintings.

If there is any moment in Richter's career when history, or its traces, emerge as a sustained and structuring subject, it is in the group of paintings known and often referred to as the Baader–Meinhof cycle, a sequential series of fifteen paintings that are collectively, and more formally, referred to by the title, *October 18, 1977* (1988).[3] It is those paintings that Richter describes, in a set of terse observations, in his notes of 7 October 1988, the passage a portion of a longer set of notes prepared for the press conference that will follow the first public exhibition of the cycle at the Museum Haus Esters in Krefeld, in early 1989.

Although of varying size – the smallest, a tiny portrait, the largest, something of a monumental landscape – the paintings are united in their style, the signature black-and-white of Richter's 'photopaintings', resolutely grey and grainy in their purposeful painterly production of a fundamentally non-painterly perceptual effect, blur.[4] Perhaps even more important than matters of style, even as we acknowledge the theoretical importance and complexity of the deployment of style, and stylistic variation, in Richter's oeuvre, are matters of subject, or subjects, namely, the members of the Baader–Meinhof and the Red Army Faction (the RAF), united not only by their political formations, ideals and aspirations, but by their premature and, given their circumstances and ensuing media attention, very public deaths.

There are Andreas Baader and Gudrun Ensslin, both radicalised in the context of Berlin's 1968-era revolutionary culture, a culture shaped as much by the legacy of the Second World War as by the immediacy of the war in Southeast Asia, but played out as a generational conflict, an anti-authoritarian revolt against both the father and the *Vaterstaat*. Both Baader and Ensslin were pronounced dead on 18 October 1977, the former by gunshot, the latter by hanging. There is Ulrike Meinhof, the idealistic journalist, not fully radicalised until the shooting of student-leader Rudi Dutschke and a subsequent interview with Gudrun Ensslin, then imprisoned for the firebombing of two Frankfurt department stores. Meinhof's death occurred on 9 May 1976, by hanging. And there are Jan-Carl Raspe and Holger Meins, two RAF comrades who were arrested with Baader after a shoot-out in a Frankfurt garage in June 1972. Meins died well before the others, in November 1974, after a long hunger strike and the withholding of sufficient medical attention. Raspe, like Baader, died on 18 October 1977 of a gunshot wound.

3. As Richter's statement on 7 December 1988 makes clear, he produced more than the fifteen paintings. But it is as a cycle of fifteen that *October 18, 1977* has always addressed the public, dating from its very first exhibition in Krefeld in 1989 to its ultimate acquisition and exhibition by MoMA in New York. The additional paintings were re-used as the 'underpainting' for later abstractions.

4. For a discussion of Richter's use of blur, see Gertrud Koch, 'The Richter-Scale of Blur', *October* Vol. 62, Autumn 1992, pp. 122–42.

If there is a structuring subject to the group of paintings, a shared and coherent theme, there is, even more importantly, a strict sequential order, an emergent narrative that is developed and propelled by the pictorial movement of the cycle through space and time. The cycle begins with a small painting of Ulrike Meinhof, *Youth Portrait* (Fig. 1) rendered with a singular legibility, from a 1970 publicity photo taken for the release of her film, *Bambule* (slang for 'riot' or 'resistance'), a made-for-television drama about reform-school girls. The Meinhof portrait is followed by two somewhat larger canvasses of Meins' June 1972 arrest, *Arrest 1* and *2* (Fig. 2), blurred to the point of near illegibility, their details – Meins, an armoured car, a parking garage, shot, it would seem, from an opposing rooftop – coming into clarity only with visual knowledge, visual memory, of their source, the German media. Next is a series of three blurred but recognisable portraits, *Confrontation 1, 2, 3* (Fig. 3), Gudrun Ensslin, depicted in a set of photographs shot while she was being escorted to a police line-up in June or July of 1972.

Next is *Hanged* (Fig. 4), the seventh painting in the series, which shows Ensslin again, but this time, five years later, in 1977, a blurred figure suspended in a cell, lifeless. The following two pictures, *Cell* (Fig. 5) and *Record Player* (Fig. 6), based, unlike the others, on colour photographs, evidentiary rather than journalistic, bring the cycle, with the hanged Ensslin painting, to the date in question, 18 October 1977. They depict not Andreas Baader, but his cell, the former, a shot that reveals its blood-stained floor and book-lined walls, and the latter, a close-up, of the record player in which it is said that a gun was hidden and, on the turntable of which sits, as revealed through microscopic and computer-enhanced imaging technologies, Eric Clapton's 1974 *There's One in Every Crowd*, the last track of which, 'Opposites', is structured by the repeated (and, in many ways, quite uncanny) refrain, 'Night after day, day after night/White after black, black after white/Fight after peace, peace after fight/Life after death, death after life'.[5]

Next are *Man Shot Down 1* and *2* (Fig. 7), painted from the *Stern* photos of Baader lying in a pool of his own blood. (These two pictures, admittedly, break, even if only by a matter of minutes, the chronological sequence of the cycle, for the pictures that precede them show the cell after the body has been removed.) The Baader paintings are followed by three paintings of diminishing size, *Dead 1, 2* and *3* (Fig. 8), also from a photograph in *Stern*, of Meinhof lying dead on the floor of her prison cell. (These are the pictures that more emphatically break the temporal logic of the sequence, her death preceding that of her comrades by more than a year.)

And finally, there is *Funeral* (Fig. 9) the largest, one might even say, most monumental of the paintings, which depicts, from some distance, Baader, Ensslin and Raspe's funeral, the procession of their caskets toward their place of burial, held, after much discussion and protest, at the Dornhalden Cemetery in Stuttgart on 27 October 1977. (And I might here just note that the non-linear inclusion of Meinhof in the series, after the death of her comrades but just before the depiction of their joint burial, achieves something that circumstance, history and politics prevent, namely, a joining with her comrades in death. That is to say, in placing the paintings of the dead Meinhof after her comrades, in establishing a different sequence through the logic of the cycle, Meinhof is granted a certain pictorial entombment with her colleagues denied to her by the circumstances of her solitary death and burial.)

5. See Robert Storr, *Gerhard Richter: October 18, 1977* (The Museum of Modern Art: New York, 2000), p.117, in which he reproduces photographs of Baader's cell, from the archives of the public prosecutor's office, Stuttgart.

**Fig. 1.** Gerhard Richter, *Youth Portrait*, 1988. Museum of Modern Art, New York. Permission granted by both Art Resource and Marian Goodman Gallery.

Before pursuing a sustained reading of these pictures, let me turn, or return, to the matter of their structure, the cycle, and, and even before that, to their subject, the Baader–Meinhof group, a subject that is signalled, even if somewhat obliquely, in their title. The title, *October 18, 1977*, names not the terrorist group, nor its individual members, nor its most newsworthy or notorious activities, but a date. For anyone familiar with the social and political history of postwar Germany, while neither a point of origin nor a point of closure, 18 October 1977 resonates deeply. One in a series or sequence of dates that define the history, not just of the Baader–Meinhof Group and the Red Army Faction, but of a postwar German nation consumed and convulsed by the phenomenon of terrorism and its attendant consequences, 18 October 1977 marks the date of three deaths. On that date, three members of the Baader–Meinhof Group, Andreas Baader, Gudrun Ensslin, and Jan-Carl Raspe, were found dead in their cells at the Stammheim prison. Whether acts of resignation, resistance, or retribution, the deaths were officially declared suicides (as was Ulrike Meinhof's death there the year previously). However, many on the Left believed then and remain convinced now that they had been murdered, at once martyrs to, and, ironically, also final proof in their



**Fig. 2.** Gerhard Richter, *Arrest*, 1988. Museum of Modern Art, New York. Permission granted by both Art Resource and Marian Goodman Gallery.

ideological quest to use terrorism to reveal what they understood to be the oppressive, if not fascistic, character of the state.[6]

I should make clear that even though I raise the issue of the ambiguity and suspicion that surround their deaths, I do not intend to sort out, or even sort through, those debates. Certainly, the historical, and, in turn, the art-historical community is divided. Where Robert Storr, in what many would consider the definitive account of Richter's cycle to date, takes the circumspect position that the circumstances of their deaths can neither be proven nor disproven, and, moreover, that even with knowledge of mislaid evidence, investigative lapses and anomalies in official explanations, there is not sufficient evidence for deeming their deaths murders, other art historians, Benjamin Buchloh foremost among them, simply presume their deaths to be murders.[7] Certainly, Richter himself, if his words are any indication, sees that his pictures, even as they are drawn from the photographic evidence that remains, present not a theory, or an interpretation, but, instead, as he writes on 7 December 1988, a 'refusal to answer, to explain, to give an opinion'. Of course, not long after writing those words, Richter concedes, in a conversation with Jan Thorn-Prikker, that 'they probably did kill themselves, which for me makes it all almost more terrible' and suggests that his paintings offer up 'compassion

6. For a journalistic historical account of the Baader–Meinhof, see Stefan Aust, *The Baader–Meinhof Group: The Inside Story of a Phenomenon*, trans. Anthea Bell (Bodley Head: London, 1985), the primary source for Robert Storr's excellent chapter, 'What Happened', in his 2000 catalogue dedicated to the cycle. It was, on Storr's account, reading Aust's book that in part inspired Richter to paint *October 18, 1977*.

7. Storr, *Gerhard Richter*, p. 63 and Benjamin Buchloh, 'A Note on Gerhard Richter's *October 18, 1977*', *October* Vol. 48, Spring 1989, pp. 89–109.

**Fig. 3.** Gerhard Richter, *Confrontation 1*, 1988. Museum of Modern Art, New York. Permission granted by both Art Resource and Marian Goodman Gallery.

8. As printed in 'Conversation with Jan Thorn-Prikker Concerning the Cycle *18 October 1977*' in Obrist (ed.), *Daily Practice of Painting*, pp. 203, 205.



**Fig. 4.** Gerhard Richter, *Hanged*, 1988. Museum of Modern Art, New York. Permission granted by both Art Resource and Marian Goodman Gallery.

also for the failure; the fact that all illusion of being able to change the world has failed'.[8]

Nor, I should also make clear, do I intend to claim these paintings as a singular, or in some ways exceptional cultural encounter with contemporary German political history, even if they are the most sustained and monumental form of painterly engagement with the issue of terrorism produced in the postwar period. In the immediate aftermath, not simply of 18 October, but the series of events that defined the autumn of 1977, some of the most prominent filmmakers of the day, among them, Rainer Werner Fassbinder, Alexander Kluge, Edgar Reitz, Bernhard Sinkel, and Volker Schlöndorff, joined the writer Heinrich Böll to produce the film *Germany in Autumn* (*Deutschland in Herbst*), a collaborative project that combined contemporary journalistic footage, archival materials, *cinéma vérité*, narrative cinema and historical recreation to address that eponymous autumn, a period marked also by the hijacking and liberation of a Lufthansa jet in Mogadishu and the kidnapping and execution of the industrialist Hanns-Martin Schleyer. And certainly, Margarethe von

**Fig. 5.** Gerhard Richter, *Cell,* 1988. Museum of Modern Art, New York. Permission granted by both Art Resource and Marian Goodman Gallery.

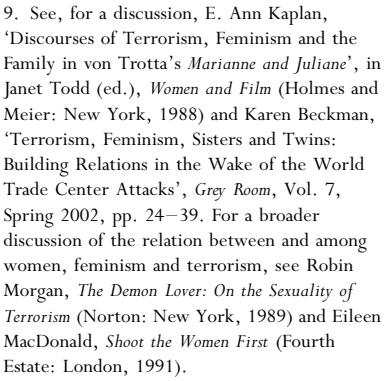

**Fig. 6.** Gerhard Richter, *Record Player*, 1988. Museum of Modern Art, New York. Permission granted by both Art Resource and Marian Goodman Gallery.

Trotta's 1981 film *Marianne and Juliane* (*Die bleierne Zeit*), based loosely on the life of Gudrun Ensslin and her sister, stands as another important, although by no means isolated, cinematic encounter with that history, even as it stages a larger dialogue about the relation between feminism and terrorism.[9] But with the exception of two paintings by Wolf Vostell, one of the murdered student pacifist Benno Ohnesorg (1967) and the other of the student leader Rudi Dutschke (1968), the victim of an assassination

9. See, for a discussion, E. Ann Kaplan, 'Discourses of Terrorism, Feminism and the Family in von Trotta's *Marianne and Juliane*', in Janet Todd (ed.), *Women and Film* (Holmes and Meier: New York, 1988) and Karen Beckman, 'Terrorism, Feminism, Sisters and Twins: Building Relations in the Wake of the World Trade Center Attacks', *Grey Room*, Vol. 7, Spring 2002, pp. 24–39. For a broader discussion of the relation between and among women, feminism and terrorism, see Robin Morgan, *The Demon Lover: On the Sexuality of Terrorism* (Norton: New York, 1989) and Eileen MacDonald, *Shoot the Women First* (Fourth Estate: London, 1991).



**Fig. 7.** Gerhard Richter, *Man Shot Down 1*, 1988. Museum of Modern Art, New York. Permission granted by both Art Resource and Marian Goodman Gallery.

**Fig. 8.** Gerhard Richter, *Dead*, 1988. Museum of Modern Art, New York. Permission granted by both Art Resource and Marian Goodman Gallery.

**Fig. 9.** Gerhard Richter, *Funeral*, 1988. Museum of Modern Art, New York. Permission granted by both Art Resource and Marian Goodman Gallery.

attempt, the neurological damage from which would ultimately claim his life, a 1972 sculptural installation by Joseph Beuys, entitled *Dürer – I'll guide Baader + Meinhof through Dokumenta V personally*, and Sigmar Polke's 1978 *Dr. Bonn*, prominent postwar German artists generally did not take on the subject of the Baader–Meinhof, that is, until 1988, when Richter painted his cycle, *October 18, 1977*.

That said, even if it is not my intention to engage debates about history and its interpretation, about the political culture of Germany in the 1970s and 1980s, it *is* my intention to engage questions about the relationship between historical subjects and postwar painting, about the forms that something that we might call 'history painting', for lack of a better term, might take in the present. For even if Richter does not offer up an opinion, an explanation, or an answer, he does put forth a series of representations in visual form, a sequence of pictorial encounters with a pressing, if not, on some accounts, repressed subject within contemporary German political culture. Moreover, given both the *belatedness* of their execution – more than ten years after the fact – and the *embeddedness* of their subject – the complex relationship between the emergence of terrorism and legacy of fascism, Richter's cycle produces a pictorial encounter with something that we might well call postwar German history.

More specifically, given the subject of that pictorial encounter, namely, not so much the *lives* of a group of individuals, but their *deaths*, it is my intention to raise questions about the very status of Richter's pictorial encounter, in terms of both form and function. Thus, even as I engage the question of the representation of history, it is my intention to think about these paintings not so much, or not only, as 'history paintings', than as something we might call commemorative or *memorial* painting, a pictorial practice that produces the possibility of performing the work, if not of mourning, of remembrance.[10] In other words, I want to propose that as much as 'history painting' is the rubric through which the Baader–Meinhof paintings are generally understood, even if understood differently, such a structuring concept may be, not so much inadequate, as inaccurate. That is to say, are they really history paintings at all? Is that their genre? Or are they something else? What forms do memorial painting, as opposed to history painting, take? What is their relation to historical events? And what, I would ask further, is their particular relation to death? And finally, I would pose also the following question: What does it mean that Richter painted and exhibited a cycle?

Certainly, Benjamin Buchloh raises the issue of commemoration in his 1989 article, one of the earliest treatments of the Richter cycle, suggesting that the paintings attempt 'to initiate a reflective commemoration of these individuals'.[11] But his more emphatic and overarching project is to insist upon Richter as the postwar German painter, who, against such figures as Anselm Kiefer, whom Buchloh reduces to painting 'polit-kitsch', is able to create a singular form of neo-avant-garde painting. That is, Buchloh understands Richter to uniquely engage a postwar German crisis in historical memory – the doubly amnesiac postwar German present, that is, a German nation burdened by the legacy of fascism and the later, and not unrelated, phenomenon of terrorism. (And one might even speak of a triply amnesiac postwar German present if we take into account also the legacy of Communism.) At the same time, Buchloh understands Richter to uniquely engage a 'crisis' in contemporary painting, a situation in visual representation produced, already within historical

10. For another form of this discussion, one that raises the question of the relation between postwar German painting and history, or historical trauma, and the possibility of remembrance, see Lisa Saltzman, *Anselm Kiefer and Art after Auschwitz* (Cambridge University Press: New York, 1999).

11. Buchloh, 'A Note' (1989), p. 105. Subsequently, in his 'Divided Memory and Post-Traditional Identity: Gerhard Richter's Work of Mourning', *October*, Vol. 75, Winter 1996, pp. 61–82, Buchloh situates aspects of Richter's work, though not the Baader–Meinhof cycle, within a context of paternally-indexed mourning that is deeply indebted to Alexander and Margarethe Mitscherlich's *The Inability to Mourn: Principles of Collective Behavior* (1967), trans. Beverly R. Placzek (Grove Press: New York, 1975).

modernism, by the related emergence of photography and modernist painting. I should just note that I fundamentally disagree with his singular elevation of Richter, as well as his dismissal, here and elsewhere, of Kiefer's work, as I see Kiefer engaged in a similarly self-conscious enterprise, in both historical and aesthetic terms.

While I cannot begin to address here the contributions of all of the scholars who have weighed in on the matter of Richter's Baader–Meinhof cycle,[12] it is Robert Storr who, although now already several years ago, offered the most sustained and synthetic treatment of the cycle. Against Buchloh, but, at the same time indebted to his work and the work of many other scholars, Storr presents Richter's work not as an instantiation of the end of history painting, an end which nevertheless offers up, rather than refuses, figuration, but as an instantiation of its new or at least renewed possibilities. In the final chapter of his catalogue dedicated to the cycle, a chapter entitled 'Painting History – Painting Tragedy', Storr traces a certain history of modernist history painting, one which, on his account, runs from David's *Death of Marat*, to Goya's *The Execution of the Third of May*, to Gericault's *Raft of the Medusa*, to Manet's three versions of the *Execution of Emperor Maximilian*, up through Kathe Kollwitz' *Commemorative Print for Karl Liebnecht* and Leon Golub's *Mercenaries*.[13] If I had to condense, for the sake of rhetorical clarity, the two positions, I would say that where for Buchloh the genre of history painting adheres, but only as a petrified convention, a kind of mortuary remains, for Storr the genre is not yet fully evacuated of its powers or possibilities, and its practice is then not merely a melancholic rehearsal of pictorial convention, but a hopeful demonstration of painterly conviction.

But whether a repetition or revival of convention, the question is, as I have already suggested, which convention? Are they history paintings? Is that their form, their structure, their history (and by history, I mean their lineage within a tradition of representational practice)? If I may pose a very simple question, how many history paintings, let alone, if we want to invoke another category, modern paintings, take the form of a cycle?

Some might propose Robert Motherwell's *Elegy to the Spanish Republic*, 1953–54, which, like Richter's cycle, uses painting to engage a subject of recent political history, and does so in explicitly elegiac form. But Motherwell's paintings are not a cycle, despite their thematic unity, instead functioning as a repeated exploration of and variation on an abstract set of forms, an incipient serialism rooted in the painterly strategies of Abstract Expressionism. Perhaps more to the point, there is Cy Twombly's work. First, there is his classically-inspired, monumental series of paintings, *Fifty Days at Illium*, 1977–78, conceived of and installed as a cycle at the Philadelphia Museum of Art. And there is the more recent example of another depiction of battle, this time from the history of the Venetian Renaissance, *Lepanto*, displayed as a cycle at the Gagosian Gallery in New York in 2001.

However, if we suspend consideration of Twombly, for his concerns, pictorial, theoretical, and historical, are fundamentally different from Richter's, and if we are not distracted by the emergence, in both Pop and Minimalism, if not already before that, in the Impressionist practice of Monet, of structures of seriality and repetition that give us the series, but not the cycle, there is little in a history of modernist painterly practice that takes the form of the cycle. There is little that functions as something other than, to quote Donald Judd, speaking of Minimalism and its 'specific

12. See, for example, Hubertus Butin, *Zu Richters Oktober-Bildern* (Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König: Cologne, 1991), *Gerhard Richter: 18 Oktober 1977*, with contributions by Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, Stefan Germer, and Gerhard Storck (Museum Haus Esters: Krefeld; Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König: Cologne, 1989), Kei-Uwe Hemken, 'Suffering from Germany – Gerhard Richter's Elegy of Modernism: Philosophy of History in the Cycle *October 18, 1977*', in Eckhart Gillen (ed.), *German Art from Beckmann to Richter: Images of a Divided Country* (Dumont Buchverlag: Cologne, 1997), pp. 381–403, and his *Gerhard Richter: 18. Oktober 1977* (Insel Verlag: Frankfurt and Leipzig, 1998), Martin Henatsch, *Gerhard Richter 18, Oktober 1977: Das verwischte Bild der Geschichte* (Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag: Frankfurt, 1998), Gertrud Koch, 'Sequence of Time', *Parkett*, Vol. 35, March 1993, pp. 76–79, Donald Kuspit, 'Features: All Your Yesterdays', *Artforum International*, Vol. 8, April 1990, pp. 129–32, Jan Thorn-Prikker, 'Ruminations on the *October 18, 1977* Cycle', Parkett, Vol. 19, March 1989, pp. 143–53 (reprinted in *The Daily Practice of Painting* as 'Conversation with Jan Thorn-Prikker Concerning the Cycle *18 October 1977*'), Rainer Usselmann, '*18. Oktober 1977*: Gerhard Richter's Work of Mourning and Its New Audience', *Art Journal*, Spring 2002, pp. 4–25.

13. Storr, 'Painting History – Painting Tragedy' (2000), pp. 118–42. For a more general account of the relation between Richter's work and history painting, see David Green, 'From History Painting to the History of Painting and Back Again: Reflections on the Work of Gerhard Richter', in David Green and Peter Seddon (eds.), *History Painting Reassessed: The Representation of History in Contemporary Art* (Manchester University Press: Manchester and New York, 2000), pp. 31–49.

objects', 'Continuity, one thing after the other'.[14] That is, or so I would contend, until we come to Barnett Newman's *Stations of the Cross*.

14. Donald Judd, 'Specific Objects', *Arts Yearbook*, Vol. 8, 1965, p. 82.

Barnett Newman's *Stations of the Cross: Lema Sabachthani (Why hast thou forsaken me)*, 1958–66 (Fig. 10), stands as one of the exceptional epic cycles of painting in a history of visual modernism. As such, it certainly warrants our attention in contemplating the genre and form of the cycle in relation to Richter's painterly endeavour. Moreover, if we press the question of format, namely, their shared identity as painterly cycles, to more particular questions of internal structure and form, it bears noting that both Newman and Richter paint and exhibit a sequentially ordered set of fifteen paintings, and, I might add, fifteen black and white paintings. Here I do just want to point out, should the reader be making calculations, and coming up against the knowledge that there are fourteen stations of the cross, not fifteen, that Newman's *Stations of the Cross* is effectively a series of fifteen paintings. That is, since the very first time it

**Fig. 10.** Barnett Newman, *Stations of the Cross, Lema Sabachthani*, (*First Station*), 1958. National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C.

was exhibited at the Guggenheim in 1966, Newman's cycle has been installed, in locations both permanent (it is in the collection of National Gallery in Washington, DC) and temporary (most recently, the 2002 Barnett Newman retrospective at the Philadelphia Museum of Art), as a sequence, not of fourteen, but of fifteen paintings, the sequence of fourteen stations joined in every instance by *Be II*, which stands as the concluding, and fifteenth, painting.

However, their connection does not rest in matters of numbers alone. There is the matter of shared subject, that is, the thematic of martyrdom, of suffering and sacrifice offered up in the interest of a larger cause. Which is not to say that I intend to reduce Richter's cycle to a pictorial passion play, in which the Baader–Meinhof terrorists are literally depicted and enshrined as secularised Christian martyrs. (And certainly, neither is Newman's cycle a literal depiction of Christian martyrdom, given the resolute abstraction of its means and the complicated place it holds in the oeuvre of an artist who was, if anything, preoccupied not by the New Testament, but by the Hebrew Bible, the Talmud and the esotericism of Kabbalah.) But I do intend to suggest certain points of resonance, first with Newman's pictorial cycle of secularised commemoration (and here I should explicitly acknowledge Mark Godfrey's singularly productive and suggestive reading of Newman's postwar cycle as an epic form of post-Holocaust commemorative painting),[15] and, secondly, on an even deeper level, with the theological subject that is at once evoked in and evacuated from the resolutely abstract surfaces of Newman's paintings, namely, the *Via Crucis*, the Way of the Cross, the martyrdom of Christ.

My claim, then, is something like the following. Richter's cycle is *not* a repetition of Newman's cycle. And yet, at the same time, Richter's cycle *is* a repetition of Newman's cycle. Let me explain. What I want to propose is a situation of relation that transcends questions of structural analogy, even as that structural analogy will in some ways motivate and support the account that follows. I want to propose a way of positioning two cycles of paintings that in no way relies on establishing intention or influence (although Newman is an artist whom Richter greatly admired) and instead depends on establishing certain points of congruence and resonance, mobilising a history of painting in order to understand the painting of history.

In other words, I mean to suggest that Richter's cycle, as a cycle, not only recapitulates in its procession of paintings something of the structure of Newman's modernist pictorial cycle, but also reiterates, even if it does not explicitly speak, something of the narrative that Newman takes as his structuring subject. For Newman, a Jewish artist painting in America in the postwar period, the explicit invocation of the Stations of the Cross offers a means of figuring, albeit abstractly, a forsakenness that is no longer, or not only, theological and Christian, but historical and Jewish. For Richter, the invocation of the Stations of the Cross remains interred, unspoken, part of what I would like to suggest is the deep structure of the series, the deep structure of their ritualised performance of remembrance in the name of contemporary subjects, and victims, of history.

'Why hast thou forsaken me', '*lema sabachthani*', such is the utterance, the titular, if not pictorial inquiry, the cry of Newman's paintings, in which Christian narrative is used to give structure and meaning to a cycle of modernist paintings, paintings that for some, particularly those that are compelled by Godfrey's reading, offer the possibility of painting,

15. I was introduced to Godfrey's work through his presentation, '"The Stations of the Cross": Memory and the Holocaust', at 'Reconsidering Barnett Newman: A Symposium', held at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, 5–7 April 2002. That paper was subsequently published in revised form as 'Barnett Newman's *Stations* and the Memory of the Holocaust', *October*, Vol. 108, Spring 2004, pp. 35–50. His dissertation, *The Memory of Modernism: Abstract Art and the Holocaust*, in addition to Newman's *Stations* (1958–66) examines Morris Louis' *Charred Journal: Firewritten* (1951) and Frank Stella's *Polish Villages* (1970–71).

particularly the painterly cycle, as a form of monumental memorial. As Newman writes of his work, in the catalogue that accompanies their debut exhibition at the Guggenheim in 1966, repeating the subtitle of the cycle and offering something of an explanation of his relation to the words of Christ, as described in the books of Matthew and Mark:

> *Lema Sabachthani* – Why? Why did you forsake me? Why forsake me? To what purpose? Why?
>
> That is the Passion. This outcry of Jesus. Not that terrible walk up the Via Dolorosa, but the question that has no answer . . .
>
> *Lema*? To what purpose – is the unanswerable question of human suffering.[16]

Of course, if Newman's cry is a form of repetition and recapitulation, so too is Jesus' cry, which, as is much of the New Testament, a recapitulation of the Hebrew Bible, here, a direct quotation of King David's lament in Psalm 22.

Thus, when Richter offers us paintings that stand, on his framing account of the cycle and its production, as 'a mirror-image of our own . . . state of forsakenness' and give us 'the hard-to-bear refusal to answer, to explain, to give an opinion', we are confronted by yet another instance of rhetorical echo, or what starts to seem a rather uncanny situation of repetition and relatedness. Or, we are given what Norman Bryson would call, not so much repetition as an instantiation of the 'logic of recognition'. For here, Richter's words cannot be spoken, or, even more to the point, cannot be heard, without some sense of their history, of their necessary encounter with a chain of utterances that precede them. That is, Richter's words, and, in turn, his paintings, as much as they address the evanescent and elusive present in which they are spoken and painted, cannot but also address the anteriority of the art historical tradition in whose aftermath they necessarily follow.[17]

I would also like to make a few additional art-historical points, which do and do not allow us to secure a relation between Richter and Newman, or, Richter and the topic of Christian, albeit here secularised, martyrdom. First, there is the matter of a cross. Many critics and art historians have noted that the final painting, the monumental rendering of the burial, *Funeral*, with its procession of the three caskets through a crowd of mourners and spectators, includes, in its uppermost register, a cruciform shape. What in the journalistic source photograph is a row of undifferentiated thin trees, none of which resolve themselves into the form of a cross, in the painting appears, indeed, even if quite small, as a discrete form, legible as a crucifix. Poised above the scene of ritual procession, the cross introduces the symbolism of the sacred into a sequence of paintings which, certain bodily postures not withstanding, has remained, at least on a level of manifest content, resolutely secular. But this is a moment when the rituals of the state come up against a different set of institutional practices, the rituals of religion.

Such rituals of religion have a deep history in the German nation, particularly in the (Catholic) South. That said, if we accept that there is a relation that is and is not a repetition of Newman's *Stations of the Cross*, then we might also allow the possibility that such a relation roots Richter's painting in a tradition that long precedes Newman, a tradition that has a history of iteration and performance that is strongly, though not uniquely, German. That is to say, if there is a ritualised act of

16. Barnett Newman, 'Artist's Statement', *Barnett Newman: The Stations of the Cross: lema sabachthani* (The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum: New York, 1966) p. 9.

17. See Norman Bryson, *Tradition and Desire: From David to Delacroix* (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 1984), as well as Steven Levine, 'Monet's Series: Repetition, Obsession', *October*, Vol. 37, Summer 1986, pp. 65–75.

commemoration that has structured the public performance of memory in the German nation, it is not, as some might think, the recent advent of memorial activity dedicated to the victims of fascism, even as debates about monuments and memorials continue to shape the discursive terrain, and, in turn, the architectural topography of the postwar present.[18]

Rather, that history, that tradition, is the representation of the Stations of the Cross, and, more to the point, the performance of the Passion Play, specifically its performance in Oberammergau, staged every ten years there since 1634. A ritualised commemoration through reenactment of Christ's journey, from judgement to crucifixion to resurrection, its performance has a particular valence in postwar Germany, given the unrepentant anti-Judaism, if not anti-Semitism, of the tale: the Jews victimize Christ. It bears noting that controversy about the latent, if not blatant, anti-Semitism of the Passion Play has in recent decades produced certain modifications in its telling, if not also its staging. In its most recent staging, in Oberammergau's millennial performance of the Passion Play, such modifications could be witnessed in the pendant installation by Robert Wilson, which, in its architectural *mise-en-scène* and visual symbolism, insisted upon remembering Nazi atrocities and Jewish victims of fascism at the same time that it staged the Stations of the Cross.[19]

My point in invoking the Passion Play and its particular history of performance in Germany is not, however, to insist upon any literal relation between its staging and Richter's cycle of paintings, but instead, to suggest the ways in which we might start to think about its history of performance in the public domain as producing a modality of commemorative practice, in which the work of remembrance is structured as a narrative progression through time, and as a physical procession through space. That is, even if we do not want to force a connection, a relation, between Richter and Newman, between Richter and the Passion Play, between the members of the Baader–Meinhof and the martyrs of Christian liturgy, and, moreover, its rituals of remembrance, we can nevertheless think about this cycle of paintings as some kind of pictorial staging of remembrance, the creation of an aesthetic situation, an architectural space of painting in which the work of memory might be performed.

That Newman's painting cycle intercedes, that it stands as a pictorial, albeit abstract, concretisation of that narrative trajectory, in which temporal progression and physical procession come together in the epic form of the monumental painted cycle, simply instantiates, before Richter, something of the possibility of painting as a form of, or a site for, remembrance. Each might be seen as functioning as a mnemonic device, in which a sequence of images comes together with an architectural environment to produce, if I may evoke once again the Passion Play (if not also ancient and mediaeval theories of memory), a theatre of memory.[20] Put quite reductively, what such structures of representation allow is a way of seeing Richter's paintings as something other than 'history painting', and instead, a way of seeing Richter's cycle as a commemorative cycle, a memorial cycle, dedicated to a group of historical figures whose premature deaths transformed them into secular martyrs.

If (art) history haunts Richter's practice, so to does the history of religion, of, more specifically, Christianity and Christian iconography, his series of *Annunciations after Titian* from the early 1970s one of the most vivid examples. More to the point, in the 1990s, only some years after Richter

18. Put more polemically, even if it was in December of 1970 that Willy Brandt knelt, with hands clasped and head bowed, before Nathan Rappaport's memorial to the victims and freedom fighters of the Warsaw Ghetto, ushering in an unprecedented era of public acts of commemoration, there was and is a deeper history of ritualised public acts of remembrance in the German nation.

19. See, for example, John Rockwell, 'Stepping Past the Wolves on Jesus' Path Toward Death', *New York Times* (5 October 2000). The Wilson piece, I should just note, was subsequently displayed in 2002 as a temporary installation, *14 Stations*, at Mass MoCA.

20. For a further discussion of theatres of memory, see Guiliana Bruno's evocative and encyclopaedic account of the affective spaces of modern art, architecture and film, *Atlas of Emotion: Journeys in Art, Architecture and Film* (Verso: New York and London, 2002). See also, such a foundational text as Frances Yates, *The Art of Memory* (1966) (Routledge: London, 1999).

**Fig. 11.** Gerhard Richter, *Abstract Painting* (*Rhombus*), 1998. The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston.

completed the Baader–Meinhof cycle, he produced a series of six canvases, all titled *Abstract Picture (Rhombus)* (Fig. 11). Those paintings resulted from an invitation issued by representatives of the Catholic Church, who had approached him with the possibility of painting the stigmatisation of Saint Francis for a modern church designed by Renzo Piano. (One might even suggest that his early black-and-white canvas, *Stag* of 1963, is steeped in an iconographic tradition of Christian martyrs.)[21]

In some respects, Richter's rhombus paintings are not dissimilar from the moment when Mondrian experiments with the lozenge as a means of exploring the possibilities and limits of horizontality and verticality in his increasingly reductive, even ascetic, painterly practice. Unlike Mondrian, however, Richter produced his abstract paintings as frankly anthropomorphic, a means of introducing Christian iconographic content through form alone, insisting upon the axial orientation of the picture

21. Storr describes Richter's response to the invitation by first invoking those secular modern artists who have undertaken religious commissions. As a primary example, he mentions the windows and murals Matisse created for the Chapel of the Rosary of the Dominican Nuns of Vence. He also mentions, though making nothing more of it, Barnett Newman's *Stations of the Cross*, though this was not, of course, a religious commission. Storr goes on to describe that although Richter's first response was to decline the invitation, not wanting to commit himself to illustrating a story, he proposed instead a series of abstract pictures, in which, without turning to figuration, he could introduce the iconographic content of more traditional religious art by

plane, in which a shape that is at once a cross and a body with outstretched arms is iterated in the very structure of the now emphatic vertical and horizontal points that define the rotated canvases. (It bears noting as well that in 1996, Richter produced a tiny sculptural work, *Cross*, a 75/8" × 75/8" × 5/8" gold cross.)

When pressed, in an interview with Storr, to speak about his attitudes about religion, Richter noted that his parents were Protestant, rather than Catholic, and that he had renounced religion as a teenager. But he then went on to say, 'I was very moved when our two children were baptised ... That is my culture, my history, the last 2000 years were Catholic and it was not so bad'.[22] When asked about the tiny sculptural crucifix, whose configuration is somewhat unorthodox, given its elongated horizontal element and the high intersection of its vertical and horizontal pieces, he explained that he used his own body, with arms outstretched, as a measurement, a prototype. Given this acknowledged collapsing of the self onto the body of the martyred Christ, Storr pressed him further, urging him to define the level of his religious commitment. When Richter then declared, 'I am a sympathiser', Storr pointed out that the term was used to describe those people who tacitly supported the Red Army Faction. In response to further queries, Richter makes clear that he chose the term quite carefully, purposefully, and was more than aware of the ideological implications of the term, to which he then added 'The term "sympathiser" is very much rooted in that history',[23] that history being the history of the Red Army Faction and the Baader–Meinhof.

Whether or not Richter is 'sympathetic' to his subjects, or to the subject of religion, we can nevertheless start to produce a set of relations, an array of affinities, in which Christian iconography comes together with an avowedly secular painterly practice, producing something of a secularised cycle of martyrdom, or, at the very least, a commemorative cycle of paintings. For these paintings are producing, if nothing else, an insistent, unavoidable encounter with the subject of death. In other words, if there is a structuring logic to these paintings, if there is a thematic or narrative content that remains apprehensible, it is the staging of death, the encounter with death, made visible, at the same time that it is at once mediated by and instantiated in, the grounding pictorial source for the series, the photograph.

By which I mean the following: Even as the cycle begins with the youthful, idealistic promise of the first portrait, it quickly gives way to its undoing, first in the depiction of arrest, then in the literal depiction of death, in lifeless body after lifeless body, and finally, in the representation, not of death, but of the public ritual performed to lay those bodies to rest, the monumental depiction of the funeral procession, three caskets on their way to their final burial. With the exception of that first picture, the narrative movement of the cycle is unrelentingly toward death, even before it depicts death as its literal subject. In other words, with the exception of that very first picture, painted from a portrait from a time that precedes all of the moments depicted in the subsequent pictures, a time before the radicalization that will define and destroy the founding members of the Baader–Meinhof, the pictures show nothing but the demise of the movement, the demise of its members. The cycle depicts arrest, incarceration, death, and burial.

Predicated as they are on photography, even if the grounding photograph is blurred, transformed, obscured through its reiteration in painterly form,

working on the level of morphology, rotating and squeezing the rectangle of the stretcher to produce a series of diamond-shaped, fundamentally monochrome canvases. Storr (2002), pp. 81–4.

22. As quoted in Storr (2002), p. 83.

23. This discussion with Richter is reproduced through both direct quotation and paraphrasing. Storr (2002), p. 83.

the paintings also repeat something of photography's fundamentally commemorative relation to the past, its indexical status, its chemical function as a trace of the lives, and even the deaths, of the subjects who once occupied physical space before the camera lens.[24] The photograph, then, is already commemorative, an anticipatory memorial, left behind as a ghostly spectre of its apprehended subject. Here, I invoke the ontological condition of the photograph, what Roland Barthes would call its 'eidos', its fundamental mortification of the subject before the lens,[25] what Andre Bazin would call its 'embalming' of the dead.[26]

There is, then, the particular situation of the 'arrest' depicted in the second and third photographs, a capturing of the subject that at once depicts an event in the lives of the Baader–Meinhof terrorists but, at the same time, also literalises the activity of photography and augurs the arresting of life to come at its accelerated, but always inevitable end. And here I should also note, in a return to the matter of the format of the cycle, that the situation of arrest (if not in some sense, also, repetition) is built into the very structure of the cycle. That is, as much as the sequence of paintings proceeds through space and time in a roughly linear fashion, the sequence does not offer an entirely seamless progression. Instead, the paintings stop, stutter, linger on certain subjects, certain scenes, presenting them not once, but twice, even three times, arresting movement even as whatever movement there is leads, inexorably, to death, to a final, and irredeemable state of arrest.[27]

Some would claim, however, that arrest, or rest, is not the state of these paintings, this cycle. For the philosopher Gregg Horowitz, photography represents a suspension, rather than a representation, of death. On his account, through photography, the dead remain 'undead', unburied, and, in turn, the paintings, based as they are on a series of primarily but not exclusively journalistic photographs, repeat that condition of 'afterlife', furthering their spectral presence in a postwar psycho-social economy but also allowing for a German public to experience those deaths, with something of the belated temporality of the traumatic.[28] One might also, following the logic of his account, suggest that the cycle, be it, or be it not, a restaging of the Stations of the Cross, gives these subjects, this subject, an 'afterlife', allows for a return of the subject, performing something like a secular resurrection.

The question then, is whether these subjects of history are ultimately laid to rest, mourned and remembered through their representation in painting, in a cycle of paintings, through their narrative entombment, or whether the cycle, in its fundamental circularity, offers up, not closure, but instead, infinite repetition, the inevitable and intractable deferrals of a fundamentally melancholic disavowal. Certainly, there is a resolute finality to the sequence, and with that, to the cycle. Beyond the evident conclusion of the cycle in the sheer fact of a funeral, a burial, what we witness here all together is a set of paintings offered up as mortuary remains, each blurred, black-and-white surface an instantiation of the cold, grey slab of the tombstone.

And yet they are a very particular kind of tombstone. Unknown soldiers, secular martyrs, the members of the Baader–Meinhof are and are not identified in this emphatically commemorative cycle of paintings. For we are never given their names, even if our present relation to that history allows us to name the individual subjects. Instead, we are given, not specific, but generic descriptions of subject, the precision of language

24. See Geoffrey Batchen, *Burning with Desire: The Conception of Photography* (MIT Press: Cambridge, 1997).

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

26. Andre Bazin, 'The Ontology of the Photographic Image', in *What Is Cinema?* Vol. 1, trans. Hugh Gray, (University of California Press: Berkeley, 1967).

27. Certainly here one would make productive reference to Hal Foster's treatment of Andy Warhol's silk-screen series of disaster photographs, Foster's discussion deeply indebted to both Barthes and Lacan. See his section 'Traumatic Realism' (pp. 130–6) in his chapter, 'The Return of the Real', in *The Return of the Real* (MIT Press: Cambridge, 1996), pp. 127–168.

28. Gregg Horowitz, 'The Tomb of Art and the Organon of Life: What Gerhard Richter Saw', in *Sustaining Loss: Art and Mournful Life* (Stanford University Press: Stanford, 2001), pp. 133–69.

here, much like the acuity of photographic representation, turned to blur. We are given, not Ulrike Meinhof, but 'youth portrait', not Raspe, but 'arrest', not Enslin, but 'confrontation', and 'hanged', not Baader, but 'cell', 'record player', 'man shot down', and in the concluding image, simply, 'funeral'. In other words, even as these paintings depict their subjects with a photographic, if blurred realism, even as they allow us access, by way of their evidentiary, indexical and archival status, to their presumptive subjects, the paintings withhold from us the names of those historical subjects depicted on their surfaces. They give us only a series of events. And, as a cycle, they give us an organising title, which, for all of its historical specificity, is that most generic and cyclical of markers, a date.

And it is with the absenting of the name and the insistence upon the date that I conclude my discussion of Richter's painterly cycle, with an invocation of a quotation from Jacques Derrida, written in relation to the work of the postwar poet Paul Celan.

> The loss cannot be worse than when it extends to the death of the name, to the extinction of the proper name which a date, bereaved commemoration, remains. It crosses that boundary where mourning itself is denied us, the interiorization of the other in memory (*Erinnerung*), the preserving of the other in a sepulcher or epitaph. For in securing a sepulcher, the date would still make room for mourning, for what one calls its work. Whereas Celan also names the incinerated beyond of the date, words lost without sepulcher, 'wie unbestattete Worte.' But once dead, and without sepulcher, these words of mourning which are themselves incinerated may yet return. They come back as phantoms.[29]

And it is precisely in this concretisation of loss, in this movement from the particular to the generic, from the specific to the symbolic, from the historical to the art-historical, from the secular to the sacred, from the known to the unknown, from the painterly to the sepulchral, that Richter's cycle at once performs and prohibits, in perpetuity, the possibility of the work of memory. Thus, if we return, in conclusion, to the dialectical condition of Richter's paintings with which we began, we might also think about the generative condition of his practice, its necessary movement in and between positions of utter despair and positions of what can only be called belief, in which painting becomes an activity that is all about, not the laying to rest, but the keeping alive, one might even say, the resurrection of history's subjects, in other words, what remains as history's ghosts.

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29. Jacques Derrida, 'Shibboleth for Paul Celan', Aris Fioretos (ed.), in *Word Traces: Readings of Paul Celan* (Johns Hopkins University Press: Baltimore, 1994), p. 57.