

Selected Bibliography

Gerhard Richter. London: Tate Gallery, 1991. Texts by Neal Ascherson, Stefan Germer, and Sean Rainbird.

Gerhard Richter. 3 vols. Bonn: Kunst- und Ausstellungshalle der Bundesrepublik Deutschland, 1993. Texts by Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, Peter Gidal, and Birgit Pelzer.

Gerhard Richter: Atlas. Munich: Städtische Galerie in Lenbachhaus and Museum Ludwig, Cologne, 1990. Text by Armin Zweite.

Parkett 35 (1993). "Gerhard Richter Collaboration." Texts by Jean-Pierre Criqui, Peter Gidal, Dave Hickey, Gertrude Koch, Birgit Pelzer.

Dietrich, Dorothea. "Gerhard Richter: An Interview," *The Print Collector's Newsletter* 16, no. 4 (Sept./Oct. 1985), pp. 128–32.

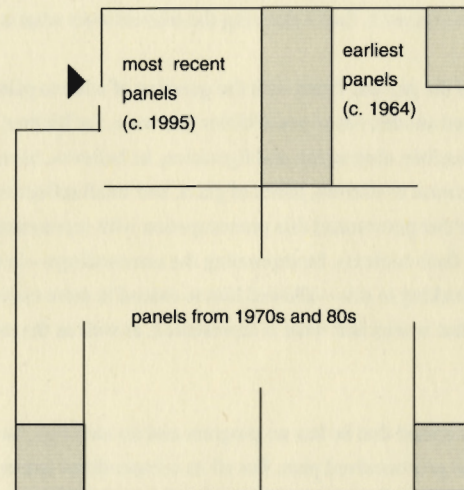
"Gerhard Richter/Jan Thorn-Prikker: Ruminations on the October 18, 1977 Cycle," *Parkett* 19 (1989), pp. 143–53.

Gerhard Richter was born in Dresden in 1932. He studied at the Kunstakademie in Dresden between 1951 and 1956 before moving to Düsseldorf in 1961. Over the next two years he completed his studies at the Düsseldorf Kunstakademie, where he has been Professor since 1971. In addition to participating widely in group shows, Richter has had numerous one-person exhibitions. In 1993–94, the fourth major retrospective of his work to date traveled throughout Europe.

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Site Map



Atlas, c. 1964–1995

583 panels

each panel 26¼ x 20¼ or 20¼ x 14½

Collection Dürckheim, Germany

GERHARD RICHTER

Atlas

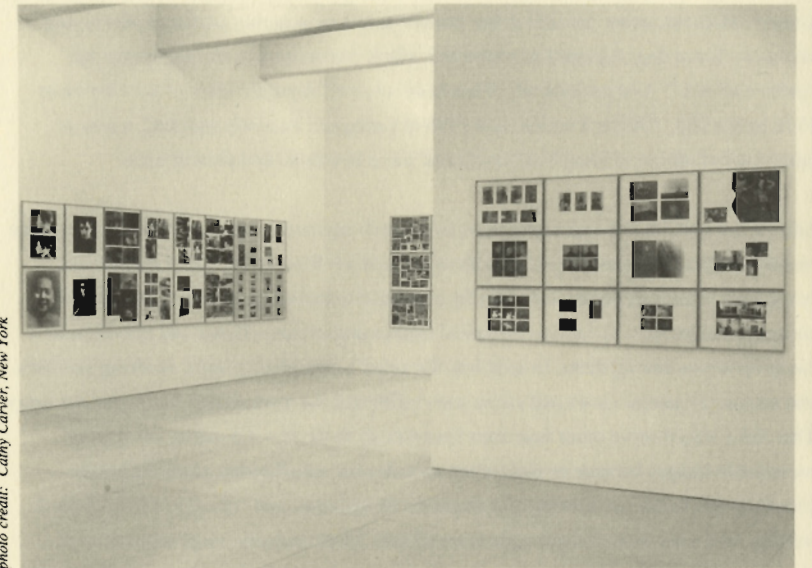


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DIA CENTER FOR THE ARTS

April 27, 1995–Spring 1996

548 West 22nd Street, New York City

Atlas

In my picture atlas...I can only get a handle on the flood of pictures by creating order since there are no individual pictures at all anymore.

—Gerhard Richter

In 1964 Gerhard Richter began amassing onto panels photographs he had collected over the previous few years—sometimes as potential sources for his paintings and sometimes on their own account. Eight years later these and subsequent related panels were exhibited in Utrecht, Holland, under the title *Atlas van der foto's en schetsen* (*Atlas of photos and sketches*). Since then Richter has continued, albeit intermittently, to supplement his “picture album.”¹ And periodically it has been returned to public view: it was shown in 1976 in Krefeld, 1989 in Munich, and 1990 in Cologne.² Recently updated, it now is comprised of almost six hundred panels and some five thousand photographs.

Atlas is not quite as homogeneous as its first panels seemed to predict. While they contain mostly amateur snapshots together with reproductions from newspapers and popular magazines, these categories were rapidly expanded to include portraits, pornographic imagery, and pictures of famous historical figures and events—Hitler and concentration camp survivors among them. In addition, the artist’s own photographs, working sketches, and seemingly casual views and vistas soon infiltrated the increasingly heterogenous array. That *Atlas* would serve other functions than simply those of a repository for storing memorable images became evident when sketches for installations, plans for public commissions, technical drawings for domestic furnishings, and collages of hypothetical settings on a truly monumental scale were added.³ More recently, large sequences of almost serially produced landscapes, travel vistas, and still lifes have been incorporated, suggesting that once the piece grew, the artist began to orchestrate it in terms of an overall composition, establishing larger rhythms, conjunctions, and references among the parts, and instituting a more strictly gridded layout. That is, what initially had a contingent, improvisational, cumulative character has taken on, with time and with repeated public presentation, a certain internal logic and dynamic peculiar to itself. In this way an album has metamorphosed into a potentially encyclopedic project, notwithstanding the personal, provisional, and incremental impulses continuing to generate it.

It is apposite that photography is the pivot of this, the most extensive work in Richter’s oeuvre. A constant in his art of the past three decades, for him it has always had a dialectical relationship with painting. Given that questions of representation lie at the heart of Richter’s enterprise, this relationship has inevitably proven a shifting, mutating one—from the early sixties when photography provided motifs for paintings to the past decade when the artist has both overpainted photographs and exhibited as prints photographs of

certain paintings originally generated by rephotographed photographs. Dave Hickey has persuasively argued against the canonical historical rationale for the changes that took place in the practice of painting after the advent of photography: namely, that painting changed because photography appropriated its descriptive and representational functions. “Richter’s photo-paintings infer,” Hickey argues, “[...] painting changed after the advent of photography not because photography *usurped* its descriptive function, but because photography *prioritized* it, thus valorizing the referent over what it signified.”⁴

If photography provided the painter, faced with the question of *what* to paint, with certain basics, abstraction offered another set of possibilities that were, for Richter, equally but not necessarily more plausible; abstraction and figuration, he believes, have parallel status as pictures. Through recourse to mirrors, panes of glass, and small reflective aluminum spheres, Richter then further permutated this preoccupation with representation by wedding these works to their contexts. Incorporating the surroundings—in effect, an idiosyncratic mode of working *in situ*—allowed him to extend in more encompassing ways the dialectic between what is seen and what is represented, as well as the media of that representation.

Richter has frequently asserted that he has no program and no ideology, and that he proceeds according to no preconceived plan. For all its compendious nature, *Atlas* is governed by no overriding logic and no polemic. Unlike, for example, Bernd and Hilla Bechers’s projects, *Atlas* is not an archive: there is neither a coherent and systematic compilation of an identifiable body of material nor an archaeological exhaustion of a specific subject. In retaining a hybrid identity, *Atlas* loosely adheres to some of the preoccupations informing Richter’s paintings without being exclusively governed by them. Most of its recent components are photographs taken by the artist himself rather than images culled from published sources, corresponding to the fact that since 1975 Richter has seldom depended on found motifs for subject matter. Not only are the initial images now his own, but they are often made in closely related series or sequences. Nonetheless, those that have been retrospectively included in *Atlas* do not necessarily constitute all that the artist took of any particular motif, nor are they always the very ones that provided the models for individual paintings. Images only exceptionally stand alone, independent and iconic; on such occasions they are framed within pencil borders as with presentation drawings, contextualized in hypothetical installations, or masked and glued to sheets onto which color studies can be developed in preparation for painting. The relational character of the groupings within most of the panels is fully in accord with the contingency underpinning the presentation of the work as a whole. For, the arrangement of the panels follows a loose rather than strict chronology, with placement determined in part by the

character of the venues—wall dimensions, heights, and proportions—in which *Atlas* is to be exhibited. Sequencing and grouping is thus employed to establish a mode of reading that is differential and contextual.

Faced with the mass of imagery available today, Richter asserts that all one can do is try to order it. He makes no attempt to offer an overriding interpretation, there is no promise of comprehensibility and definitiveness of the kind vouchsafed in an archive or by archaeology. As Benjamin Buchloh astutely notes, the relationships between the images “generate meanings and disintegrate readings.”⁵ Hence, something provisional and resistant to precise meaning emerges in *Atlas*, something which Buchloh eloquently characterizes as a check both against the impulse to generate understanding and the ever-present desire for it. *Atlas* hovers, therefore, between the promise of taxonomic order as devulged in the archive and the total devastation of that promise, which is implicit, for example, in the amorcellated, antirelational potential of photomontage. The images, fragments or details are commonplace, almost stereotypical. In their sheer ordinariness, conventionality, and ubiquity, many of these photographs seem almost interchangeable or generic, and hence serve to underplay those staples of photographic discourse: the photo as icon and the photo as index. They approach the condition Richter seeks for his paintings, which as pictures are located always between the concrete and the abstract. Buchloh argues persuasively that “We can no longer speak of ‘photography’ in terms of a homogeneous formation of practices, discourses, and institutions (no more than we could speak of ‘politics’). Photography can be discussed as a private phenomenology and as a partial semiotics, but not as a coherent, *comprehensive history*.”⁶ At a moment when the digital is replacing the analogue and the dominant paradigms of photography are undergoing a sea-change, *Atlas* returns the question of the referent to centerstage.

L. C.

1. “Gerhard Richter/Jan Thorn-Prikker: Ruminations on the October 18, 1977 Cycle,” *Parkett* 19 (1989), p. 143.

2. Small sections of *Atlas* have been shown on occasion, for example, in the recent retrospective, “Gerhard Richter,” Kunst- und Ausstellungshalle der Bundesrepublik Deutschland, Bonn, 1993.

3. In a recent interview, Richter spoke of the “dream of mine—that the pictures will become an environment or become architecture, that would be even more effective.” Quoted in

Dorothea Dietrich, “Gerhard Richter: An Interview,” *The Print Collector’s Newsletter* 16, no. 4 (Sept./Oct. 1985), p. 130. In effect *Atlas* does this when fully on view.

4. Dave Hickey, “Richter in Tahiti,” *Parkett* 35 (1993), p. 86.

5. Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, “Gerhard Richters *Atlas*: Das Archiv der Anomie,” *Gerhard Richter*, vol. 2 (Bonn: Kunst- und Ausstellungshalle der Bundesrepublik Deutschland, 1993). Translation by Benjamin H. D. Buchloh.

6. Ibid.