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.

Major funding for this exhibition has been provided by the Lannan Foundation, with additional generous support from: Lufthansa German Airlines; Doris and Don Fisher; Mimi and Peter Haas; Linda and Harry Macklowe; Ann Tenenbaum and Thomas H. Lee; and the members of the Dia Art Council and Art Circle.

Thanks to Rainald Schumacher for his assistance on the project.


GERHARD RICHTER

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 Joto's schetsen (Atlas of photos and sketches). Since then Richter has continued, albeit intermittently, to supplement his "picture album." And periodically it has been returned to public view: it was shown in 1976 in Krefeld, 1989 in Munich, and 1990 in Cologne. Recently updated, it now comprises 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 heterogeneous 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. 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, casual and character has taken on, with time and repeated public presentations, 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 imputes continuing to generate it.

It is appropriate 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—since 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, "...[that] painting changed after the advent of photography not because photography usurped its descriptive functions, but because photography prioritized it, thus valorizing the referent over what it signified." 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, parts of glass, and small reflective aluminum spheres, Richter then further transformed this preoccupation with representation by welding 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 Becher'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 only images now on 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 venue—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 overiding interpretation, there is no premise of comprehensibility and definitiveness of the kind vouchsafed in an archive by or as 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—since 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, "...[that] painting changed after the advent of photography not because photography usurped its descriptive functions, but because photography prioritized it, thus valorizing the referent over what it signified." 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, parts of glass, and small reflective aluminum spheres, Richter then further transformed this preoccupation with representation by welding 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 Becher'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 only images now on 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 venue—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 overiding interpretation, there is no premise of comprehensibility and definitiveness of the kind vouchsafed in an archive by or