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Art in America

Gerhard Richter: The Day Is Long

By Robert Storr (January 1, 2002)

Born in Dresden in 1932, Gerhard Richter came of age after World War II. In the villages of Reichenau and Waltersdorf, where his father taught school before being mobilized, Richter had a provincial childhood that mixed Tom Sawyer escapades in the forests of Saxony with compulsory membership in the Hitler Youth and a catch-as-catch-can education. His mother, the daughter of a gifted pianist and a bookseller prior to her marriage, read Goethe, Nietzsche and the classics of German literature, listened avidly to the great 18th- and 19th-century composers and encouraged her son's interest in drawing and painting.

Upon leaving grammar school at age 15, Richter found a series of temporary jobs—assisting a local photographer, decorating banners for the East German Communist regime and painting sets for a theater in the small city of Zittau. In 1952, after failing at his first try, he was admitted to the Art Academy in Dresden. During his five-year stint at the academy, Richter received a thorough but traditional studio training under the tutelage of Heinz Lothmar, a former Surrealist and dedicated Communist who supervised the mural painting department. Paradoxically, this department permitted students the greatest freedom to experiment formally, since mural painting was assumed to be a "decorative" form by otherwise strict enforcers of the prevailing Socialist Realist esthetic. Upon graduation, Richter executed several mural commissions that were well received by officials and the public. In addition to attracting a degree of recognition and assuring him a steady income, this success allowed Richter the opportunity to travel to the West.

On the second of these trips, in 1959, he visited Documenta II in Kassel. The exhibition was one of a series of surveys of international modern and contemporary art intended to fill in the blanks in German cultural history created by the 12-year blackout of the Third Reich and to present vanguard painting and sculpture condemned by authorities in the Communist Bloc. There, for the first time, Richter saw many artists about whom he had heard and many altogether unknown to him. Among those who impressed him most were Lucio Fontana and Jackson Pollock. Two years later, shortly before the Berlin Wall was erected, Richter abandoned his secure and "promising" future in Dresden and slipped over the border to West Berlin. On the advice of a friend who had made the move ahead of him, Richter enrolled in the Academy of Art in Düsseldorf.

That same year, Joseph Beuys was named professor of monumental sculpture at the academy, and though Richter always kept his distance from him, Beuys was henceforth an increasingly important presence in the burgeoning art worlds of Düsseldorf and Cologne. When Richter himself was appointed a professor at the academy in 1971, Beuys became a faculty colleague. Richter's own professor in Düsseldorf was the informal or gesture painter Karl Otto Götz, and for a brief period the younger artist worked in a physically aggressive manner influenced by Alberto Burri, Jean

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Dubuffet, Jean Fautrier and Fontana, in effect starting over again and unlearning all that he had been taught at the conservative Dresden Academy.

Almost as soon as he arrived in Düsseldorf, Richter fell in with three other students, Sigmar Polke and Blinky Palermo, also refugees from the East, and Konrad Lueg, who later changed his name and became the art dealer Konrad Fischer. With Lueg and Polke, Richter shared an active interest in Pop art, which was then brand new and which they did not consider an exclusively American or British domain. Indeed, when Richter and Lueg traveled to Paris in 1963, they introduced themselves to the dealer Ileana Sonnabend as German Pop artists. Later that year, Richter and Lueg mounted two exhibitions/ demonstrations of their own work, the first one also involving the collaboration of Polke and another friend, Manfred Kuttner. These were the first occasions on which Richter showed his photo-based paintings. The exhibitions inaugurated a singularly protean, 40-year career which was to encompass many surprising changes in his work.

The following interview was recorded Oct. 17 and 18, 1996. Overall, the exchange was more conversational than interrogative and was punctuated by more laughter than is mentioned here, for by nature Richter is as playful in his speech as he is precise. He was teasing in his answers to some questions, at times startlingly blunt in response to others. Assisting at the interview was Isabelle Moffat, who acted as skillful interpreter when the conversation shifted into German and who transcribed and, where necessary, translated the audiotape. The interview covered many topics; the parts published here-with the editorial contribution of Sue Taylor-deal with aspects of Richter's early years that are not generally known, and with issues raised by his recent work. -R.S.

Robert Storr: How it is that you first began to make paintings?

Gerhard Richter: When I was a child, at 15 or 16, I made watercolors, landscapes and self-portraits. I remember doing a watercolor of a group of people dancing. It was quite a nice one.

RS: Why does it stand out in your memory?

GR: Because I was so negative when I was young. We had moved to a new village, and automatically I was an outsider. I couldn't speak the dialect and so on. I was at a club, watching the others dance, and I was jealous and bitter and annoyed. So in the watercolor all this anger is included, at 16. It was the same with the poems I was writing-very romantic, but bitter and nihilistic, like Nietzsche and Hermann Hesse.

RS: Did your family support your making art, or was it all on the side-private?

GR: On the side. Maybe my mother approved. She was a bit crazy, so she thought this boy might be a genius.

RS: So she encouraged you?

GR: She did nothing against my efforts.

RS: That's a lot.

GR: That's a lot. That's true.

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RS: And when did you decide to pursue this activity professionally?

GR: When I was 17. I had to find a job at some point; that's when I did poster painting, lettering on banners-"Der Sozialismus lebt." That's a strange sentence, "Socialism lives."

RS: In your case, it was also a matter of "Socialism is a living."

GR: Good! And then I worked in theater, painting scenery, for half a year. It was a city theater, in Zittau, a small town about 100 kilometers from Dresden, where I lived in a dormitory for apprentices.

RS: And so it was coming out of those experiences-your poems and watercolors and your work in theater-that you decided to go to the academy?

GR: Yes. From the age of maybe 16 I had the feeling it would be right for me.

RS: And what kind of a future did you imagine as an artist, at that point?

GR: I had no idea. I just wanted to paint, to make pictures.

RS: Did you think you were going to be a painter for public occasions or for private collectors of paintings?

GR: A painter like all the others, like Lovis Corinth and Raphael and so on. A famous painter.
[Laughter]

RS: But didn't you do a mural commission just after graduation from the academy?

GR: When I left the academy, at the end, yes, I painted a large mural on the theme of health and happiness in a Socialist paradise.

RS: But you didn't see yourself continuing to make paintings of that sort, big public paintings?

GR: Maybe for some short moment I thought this could be a future for me, making big paintings, public paintings.

RS: I know from Ilya Kabakov, Eric Bulatov and other artists from the former Soviet Union that in the Eastern Bloc one could have a job as an official artist, a book designer, for example, and then be an unofficial artist in private. I wonder if you envisioned this kind of a double life, or if you expected just to paint pictures?

GR: I never really thought that I would have a job in this field, painting murals or as a public artist; I did not think it was anything serious. I was most afraid of being placed in a company. That was the usual treatment.

RS: What kind of role models were there then for being an independent artist? Who could one look to as an example of somebody who had shown that it was possible?

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GR: No one.

RS: So it was a question of something that had to be invented.

GR: Yes. There certainly was an underground, but I did not like it. Then there were freelance, self-employed artists. But there were no good painters among them. The independent artists, some of them, were overproud of their independence; they made a cult out of their status. I always had a bad feeling about that, their pride, their self-importance.

RS: What kind of art could one see at that time in East Germany?

GR: We looked very seriously at group exhibitions. At least twice a year there was a big show of work from artists' societies. In the museums it was classical art. I think the Gemäldegalerie in Dresden was still closed, because only much later did the Russians come with this "present"-they gave everything back that had been taken during the war. But there were other smaller museums, such as Pillnitz, a bit outside of Dresden, in a castle on the river. At that time there was a museum there, with Caspar David Friedrich and other good painters of the 18th and 19th centuries, Rococo paintings and pastels.

RS: You mentioned that things stopped more or less with Adolph Menzel and Impressionism?

GR: Yes. The Russian painters like Ilya Repin and Alexander Gerasimov we could not see in the original, or very seldom; we knew them only in reproduction. Of course every year we went twice to Berlin and visited the Dahlem. It was a big thing, to go to Berlin, to see a movie, go to the theaters and the museum. It was forbidden at that time to go to West Berlin, but it was easy. There was no Wall.

RS: So what kind of modern art could you see?

GR: In West Berlin, I accidentally stumbled into a gallery once, and I can't remember anything of what I saw. [Laughter]

RS: Was it because you were not prepared to look at contemporary art, or was it just not very good?

GR: It was too strange. It was completely alien. In one gallery, Galerie Gerd Rosen, there was contemporary painting, and it was very decorative.

RS: Would this be work of the '20s and '30s or from the postwar time?

GR: Postwar. Recent abstraction, recent work. I don't know the names, except for Bernhard Heiliger. Ernst Wilhelm Nay I learned of later. We were oriented to the French artists, to Impressionism, Matisse, Picasso and Léger.

RS: Did you like Léger?

GR: Yes. But I saw a painting of his last week, and I asked myself why I had liked Léger so much. It was the first time I had the feeling that this was a very stupid painting. [Laughter]

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RS: And so what other sources of information did you have then? Were there Picassos in Dresden? Did any come to Dresden in exhibitions?

GR: No, never. But I got books and catalogues, newspapers. I had an aunt who sent me every month a West German photo magazine, Magnum. That was very good.

RS: Did you use images from the magazine in your own work?

GR: No, but it was good to look at; it was so modern.

RS: Did you have other sources of information? Could you get Life, Look, Paris Match?

GR: Unless you had a connection to an aunt, you couldn't buy them.

RS: And what kind of work were you making then?

GR: In school, the exercises were as realistic as possible, in the spirit of 19th-century artists like Menzel and Wilhelm Leibl, but not so detailed as Ferdinand Waldmüller. And then at home, it was very good, we tried to be very fresh, relaxed.

RS: But it was still figurative?

GR: Yes, always.

RS: Did you work from drawings or models, or go out in the landscape?

GR: I always painted in front of reality, never from reproductions.

RS: So you never "cheated" by using photographs a little bit?

GR: No, except for one drawing, the year before I left, of bathers.

RS: And nobody noticed?

GR: I did not show it.

RS: When you, Konrad Lueg and Sigmar Polke first identified yourselves as German artists, what kind of situation were you in? What were you up against? What was it like to be a young artist in Germany in 1962 or 1963?

GR: We swam in a pool of hope. We thought, "We'll just do it." It was not a problem that the others, first the French and then American artists, were selling so well and at such high prices. It was not a topic. We were young, and the older German artists like Nay and Georg Meistermann were not very famous and not much liked. Their works were less expensive, and we felt that was only right because they were stupid.

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RS: Particularly in the late '60s and early '70s, the pressure not to paint was even greater in Germany than in the U.S. How did you manage at that time, when so many people were saying that painting was dead?

GR: I didn't believe this. But in a sense it was familiar to me, because I knew that culture was at an end, that painting couldn't do very much anymore. And as a German, I was familiar with the idea of not being worth anything. So painting wasn't worth anything, I wasn't worth anything, and then there were several other things that weren't worth anything. But nevertheless I didn't believe that. I believed in painting.

RS: In the academy, you were surrounded by people who were primarily doing performance, installation or conceptual work of one kind or the other, weren't you?

GR: Not so many. Blinky Palermo, Polke and Lueg were there. And we painted, although Lueg not so much. Most people who were doing performance were very stupid. There were only a few exceptions-like Joseph Beuys. But all the others were just fashion. So that wasn't such a problem.

RS: What was your relation with Beuys in terms of his ideas about art as a social mechanism?

GR: I always distrusted him.

RS: In terms of his ideas about art or in general?

GR: The social ideas were absolutely stupid. And the art was half fake, a fraud almost. But he was very interesting to us at the time. He was very engaging, the only one who was a rival to be taken seriously. He was really something to be dealt with.

RS: And so how did you deal with him?

GR: We observed him, the way we observed each other later.

RS: You've said you were always attracted to madness. Was Beuys's approach a kind of madness?

GR: Yes, I always saw a danger in him. Too much danger, the dangerous ability to fascinate other people, that was really amazing. Then to make all these claims, to fake something, to do something shabbily, to defraud - that's why I fled from him. So that when I saw him at a party, for instance, if he was on one side of the room, I'd be on the other.

RS: Did it also connect to his desire to create an ideology of art? Was that part of it?

GR: Yes, I think so.

RS: And how did you, Palermo and Polke deal with the situation when Beuys was such an overwhelming personality?

GR: Polke had a good strategy. He made his jokes. And he is still doing this. For Palermo, though, it was not so easy, because he was a bit weak; he couldn't defend himself. Beuys sometimes had an

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easy game with him. He would say, "Palermo, come here!" And this made me very furious. But then Palermo had his beautiful belief in painting. It was a paradise for him, the only ideal world.

RS: Did you have that in common with him? Did you see painting as an ideal world?

GR: Yes, but I see it more practically, not in such contrast with the rest of life. He had such a wild life, with drugs and so on, and so the paintings were a big contrast. It's not so with me, it's more seamless. I am proper and the paintings are proper. [Laughter] The floor is clean and the painting is clean, you know. Back then, we wanted to make art a kind of quiet protest. Because only modern art had the power. Gilbert and George had done something classical, or neo-classical, and Palermo and I wanted to introduce a kind of seriousness. That's also when the friendship with Polke broke up.

RS: Because of a particular incident?

GR: No, in general. Funny, I saw him last month in Baden-Baden. It was many, many years since the last time we saw each other. He said hello, and we talked about painting.

RS: What happened between you and Polke?

GR: We were very close and had the same ideas; we worked together and showed together and so on. And then we drifted apart.

RS: Why did you drift apart? Was it just that you each had your own direction or was there a real disagreement?

GR: Oh, no, it was not a disagreement. Just life. He took drugs, and I did not. That's all. And if you take drugs, then you have these strange friends around you. He continued to be wild and cynical and happy. [Laughter]

RS: And you wanted to make something that was the opposite of that? Something more?

GR: Serious. Classical.

RS: Do you see yourself as a modernist?

GR: No.

RS: Did you ever see yourself as a modernist?

GR: No, never. I mean, I am here, today, yes. But I never had the feeling that I was a modern artist.

RS: Do you see yourself in opposition to modern art in some ways-or modernism, I should say, not modern art. Do you feel yourself in some ways challenged?

GR: That's difficult, because the good modern artists, like Carl Andre, Bob Ryman, I like very much. But modern art has always only shown itself to me in trends and blowhards, so I couldn't be a modern artist. [Laughter] There were always powerful movements or groups that today we don't even know anymore.

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RS: One fascinating aspect of your work is the difference between the delicacy of some of the pictures-the blurred figures, still lifes and landscapes-and the abstract paintings, which are incredibly tactile, and everything happens on the surface. What accounts for that change, technically? How do you read the painting?

GR: That's a very difficult question, but they are really different, the figurative and the abstract.

RS: How is your attitude toward the activity of painting different in each case?

GR: I never tried to answer this question, because it is hard for me.

RS: You mentioned that a certain abstract painting actually started out as a picture of the Cologne Cathedral, and now there is only a little bit of this image visible underneath. If you did not know to look for it, you wouldn't see it. What happened between the initial image and the ultimate abstraction?

GR: There the method of making an abstract painting is misused to cover up a bad painting. It's not as terrible as it sounds, because, as in life, one makes a virtue out of a shortcoming. But they are really two completely separate methods.

RS: In *The Daily Practice of Painting*, the book of your writings and interviews, you talk about-I presume this is more about the abstract paintings than the figurative paintings-how each step of the painting is to cancel out a cliché, an obvious thing.

GR: Right, that's how I described it.

RS: How much do you know about an abstract painting when you begin it? Initially what kind of choices do you make about a color or about the scale of a painting?

GR: I have to have a mental picture, an image, to start. I never reach this image, but it's good to begin with it.

RS: And do you actually get to that image and destroy it, or, once you've started, do you abandon it and just go in whatever direction the painting takes you?

GR: I can't always reach the image in my mind-almost never, in fact-so that the abstract image I create is not quite there, but it gets to the point where I can leave it.

RS: Is there any difference in this respect between your abstract and your figurative work, insofar as you have the technical control to push toward a very deliberate result in the figurative work if you chose to?

GR: In order to complete a picture and say, "This is finished, this is good," it's the same, it's always the same criterion, in both the abstract and figurative paintings.

RS: And what are those criteria? Can you describe them?

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GR: It has to do with the surface of both, which at the end becomes erased, or more erased. Before that, they were richer, full of things. Uglier, but more precise maybe.

RS: Well, that certainly seems true of the more recent paintings, which have gone from having very, very rich, detailed surfaces to . . .

GR: Correct.

RS: It is almost as if, when the picture gets to a certain point, you cancel it.

GR: Yes.

RS: Are you suspicious of virtuosity?

GR: Yes, very. People always say that I am very virtuoso and that my pictures are, but I don't think I am. I am not!

RS: In what way do you mean you are not?

GR: I am not able to make a sketch from you here, just so, and that's fine. I don't have the facility to do it.

RS: But you can make paint do a great many things.

GR: Yes, it's easy with a photograph.

RS: But you say you are suspicious of virtuosity. How important is it to make things hard for yourself to make a picture? Is it essential to make the process difficult in some way?

GR: No. Ability is a given, that's not what I'm suspicious of. I hate it when people cannot do what they want to do. It goes without saying that you have to have mastery over your medium. I don't mean God-given talent but the skill that's acquired through hard work.

RS: Are you saying that people who set out to be painters should develop the necessary skills, and that you don't have an interest in work which tries to make clumsiness a virtue?

GR: Clumsiness is not a sign of quality for me.

RS: Are you then suspicious of artists who stylize clumsiness, who consider awkwardness proof of their sincerity? Would you rather artists be both skilled at what they do and make their skill work for them in very disciplined ways, even make it harder for themselves?

GR: Why should you make it even harder?

RS: Well, you do, don't you, in certain ways?

GR: I have no choice. It just becomes difficult. I would prefer it to be easy. Wouldn't we all?

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RS: What is the hardest thing about making a picture?

GR: The tough part is always at the end. The beginning is always easy. So maybe you are right about making it even harder.

RS: But where does the difficulty lie? Does the difficulty lie primarily in what the hand does or in the conception?

GR: In the conception. To see what's wrong, this is so difficult. To make it right is easy, but to see what to make and what not to make is harder.

RS: What not to make is important. But when you say that, is it because you have a very clear idea where a painting should end up, or because you have a very clear idea of where a painting should not end up?

GR: I don't have a clear idea of either. I have a vague idea.

RS: In making, for example, a figurative painting, how much do you know when you begin about how the painting is going to appear? You do have a photographic image as a reference, and you have a technique that's very much under your control. How much do you know about how the painting is actually going to look?

GR: With figurative paintings, I know a lot. I have quite a clear concept of how it should look, but very seldom does it actually work, or come to this image. For example, I always wish to make a very detailed painting, and I am almost never able to do it.

RS: Where the details would read clear and sure?

GR: Clear and sharp, and as good as Vermeer of Delft. The blurring is always a kind of emergency butchering. [Laughter] It's an emergency move at the end. To make the picture in some way attractive to look at, I blur it.

RS: I see. Something isn't going right in the painting, and the blurring then takes care of it.

GR: Yes, but prior to that, the situation is terrible.

RS: The first paintings that had that quality were from the early 1960s. There is a series of portraits of a family from 1965-Boy Baker, Girl Baker, Mr. Baker and Mrs. Baker-with what look like white strokes on top. Is that the first time you canceled a painting?

GR: With the strokes? No, I canceled the painting by blurring. I cut the four heads off. I was trying to restore the painting because it had small cracks in it, and then I got angry and made all these marks.

RS: Was the Table of 1962 the first canceled painting?

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GR: Yes.

RS: And what provoked you in that case to smear the image?

GR: I painted it very realistically, and it looked so stupid. You can't paint like that, that's the problem. You can't quite stand it anymore. Or very seldom. The Reader from 1994 is almost the way I wanted it, but that's a rare example; it is not too imprecise.

RS: No, it is quite clear. And this is actually what you imagined?

GR: Even better, but that's okay. [Laughter]

RS: It's very okay! So in a way the first cases of blurring the image started out, as you say, as emergencies, either a technical emergency-cracking- or a conceptual emergency-"I can't stand to look at something like this." At what point did you realize that this was actually a way of painting?

GR: That came very slowly. In the abstract paintings, there's sometimes this trick. I have to be careful not to do it, but I sometimes cover the painting with white and then everything is beautiful and new and fresh, like snow. All the misery is over, the terror.

RS: The terrifying part of the image itself or ...

GR: No, the way I did it, my inability to make the stupid stuff, which gets worse and worse.

RS: And what makes something stupid in your eyes? The paint itself is innocent, you know.

GR: I need an example of what you mean.

RS: How do you decide whether something is good or bad? I know it's not logical, it's not something you can state easily, but.

GR: The most important thing, in life and for humanity, is to decide what is good and what is bad. And it's the most difficult. I remember a time when it was out of fashion to judge a painting good. But all my real constructive experiences with people were about good or not good, with Polke, Palermo, Fischer or the sculptor Isa Genzken, who is very strict. "That's ugly, terrible," she'd say. It's very important.

RS: And what's the difference between good and beautiful, bad and ugly?

GR: It always means good and bad. I don't know if it is the same in English, but in German if you say it's a good painting, you already mean it's beautiful; if you say it's a bad painting, you imply also that it's ugly. It almost has moral connotations of good and evil. If we say something is beautiful, then we mean it's good.

RS: And do you believe this?

GR: Yes.

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RS: What if a painting is disturbing? "Ugly" maybe is not the right word, but what if it's upsetting or makes you uneasy?

GR: That can be a good quality, a quality you can use.

RS: I would think that many people looking at *The Reader* could easily identify the subject and can also respond to the way it is painted. On the other hand, there are paintings where the colors are mixed on the surface and mottled or unclear. Those pictures could be very disturbing to look at.

GR: Even then, it has to be good in some way. There has to be something that fits or resonates.

RS: Put another way, there seems to be in the figurative paintings, especially the recent ones, a degree of gentleness, an invitation to come into the picture. In some of the more recent abstractions, though, there is a level of aggression and a closing off of the picture. Those are very different experiences.

GR: And both have their own criteria, and they have to be good.

RS: Do you agree with that way of reading some of the abstract paintings?

GR: Yes, of course.

RS: In some of them, as you say, the white closes something off. In other cases, covering or removing the paint almost cancels the image, as if you were committing an act of aggression. Is that an accurate way to describe things?

GR: I think so, yes.

RS: How so?

GR: I find that difficult to talk about at the moment.

RS: I understand that Robert Ryman visited your studio at some point. He said to me with some perplexity that it was amazing that you could do anything and everything. My question is how do you decide what to do if you have this ability to make things in so many different ways?

GR: I never had the feeling that I have so many abilities. I did a little landscape, and then something abstract. The day is long, so I never felt that was so special. Except I developed a bad conscience. When I saw Ryman, so thorough, so persistent, painting every day, this made me a bit nervous. I thought maybe I am not a proper painter. I really often worried that there was something missing, that I was lacking something because I was trying so many things, in all directions. I envied other artists and thought they had a quality I was lacking, especially Ryman. That changed a little after I got to know him better; I got to know his problems, and my problems. [Laughter]

RS: And your problems were?

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GR: My problems? They are still the same. They haven't changed, but now I can see I have the right to keep on painting.

RS: Typically, artists were encouraged to make a consistent body of work or to make a conscious progression from one idea to the next. What's striking in your work is the apparent freedom you have given yourself to move from one idea to another without worrying about how the paintings will be received. How did you arrive at the sense that this was okay?

GR: I always hated those artists who were so consistent and had this sort of unified development; I thought it was terrible. I never worked at painting as if it were a job; it was always out of interest or for fun, a desire to try something. Other artists might paint pictures for a show. They say, "I still need large paintings." When I was struggling financially, when I had trouble with Heiner Friedrich, I couldn't be with the gallery any longer, and I had to leave. At that time, I became a teacher. I would do different jobs. I didn't want to have to make paintings I would be paid for, nor did I want to have to be nice to a dealer-although I am very nice. [Laughter] But if you force me to do something, I can't do it.

RS: And so teaching was a way to have the freedom to...

GR:...To paint. I was never a good teacher.

RS: In this country, even though many, many painters teach, there is always the impression that if you are teaching, it's because you are not really successful as an artist. It's striking that in Germany in particular almost all of the really interesting artists have taught, and many of them have taught for a very long time.

GR: That has to do with the system, the civil service. You are immediately guaranteed a lifelong salary and have a certain status as a professor. Germans are still a bit crazy with the title "professor." All the artists are professors.

RS: And they are not afraid that being in the academy makes them academic?

GR: No, you don't get better or worse. It's just a job, an extremely easy job. It's almost immoral. I have five months of vacation. And the rest, the other seven months, professors hardly need to show up. But I did; I was always very proper. It's awful!

RS: Did you have close associations with students? Did you find that teaching actually fed your work in some way or reinforced what you were doing?

GR: Thomas Schütte became a friend. He visits us with his family, and we always encourage each other. That is an exception.

RS: But you didn't have the kind of relationship with students that Beuys had, for example.

GR: No, never. Because I had no teacher, I could never imagine that students would want to hear something from me. I came into the classroom and said, "Excuse me, I don't want to disturb you."

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RS: You've mentioned that you did not want father figures, that you did not have a strong father yourself . . .

GR: And so it was impossible for me to think that students would want me as a father. Ultimately, I learned they might.

RS: Aside from the economic security that it gave you, did the teaching have an effect on how you thought about art? Do you in fact think that art is something that can be taught?

GR: In the first few years, yes, I thought there was something I could maybe communicate, or somehow, with my strange manner, show some opposition and some kind of partiality. There was a need for that.

RS: On your part?

GR: Yes. The academy was so bad and the teachers so corrupt, I thought I should do something.

RS: How do you mean bad and corrupt?

GR: In this system, you become corrupt. They were only unsuccessful artists, except Beuys, for a short time. And what they taught was truly horrible. It was so modern, the students never did what I did. I started with still lifes, and they thought it was reactionary. But I thought this an important foundation, to learn to draw and to understand what color is.

RS: And that's how you taught?

GR: Yes, it was good in the beginning. But after the times went so strange, the events of 1968 and so on, I couldn't get my position across; I couldn't offer still-life painting anymore. They refused it. And of course for some students there was no need to make a still life. Thomas Schütte, who was one of the best, or Isa Genzken, never painted a still life. We discussed.

RS: Do you take it as a challenge to paint subjects that other people think can't be painted, for example a still life, even a still life of flowers, as you've recently done?

GR: Not consciously. But perhaps unconsciously it could be a motivation. Who knows? On the other hand, I remember that when I painted my first landscape, Corsica, in 1969, it was really not for the public. I thought, "I'll do it just for fun, for me." And I didn't expect that it would be possible to show it.

RS: There are some very interesting parallels between the way you talk about your work and the way de Kooning talked about his. He was operating at a time when it seemed to many people-artists as well as critics-that there were certain things you could do and certain things you couldn't. And he always said, "The minute it's obvious you cannot do something, you have to do it." [Laughter] When it was no longer possible to paint the figure, he said, "Fine, then I will have to paint women, because obviously it is impossible to do." And I wonder if there isn't an element of this in your thinking as well.

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GR: When I started the landscapes, I thought you could already sort of do what you wanted, although Minimalism and Conceptual art were still dominant. But 10 years later it was more in fashion to do different things. Martin Kippenberger did everything. [Laughter]

RS: Tacking against the wind. To go back a little earlier in our conversation, we were talking about when you took a job at the academy and didn't want to be in a position of having to make work that was consistent for the sake of the market. I wonder if art history had special importance for you, in terms of how you approached your own work, or whether you were willing simply to step aside and do what you were compelled to do while art history took care of itself?

GR: I am definitely inside of art history; it's my domain, my home.

RS: And where are you inside that domain?

GR: In the art, the painters' culture.

RS: The culture of painters?

GR: Yes.

RS: But not necessarily inside an avant-garde that defines art history according to a precept?

GR: No. That's very foreign to me.

RS: How do artists make art history?

GR: They never do, they never make art history. They do their job, and then after 10 years it's art history. [Laughter]

RS: There is another recent body of work which is perhaps even more surprising than the landscapes in certain ways-the paintings you made in 1995 of your wife and young child. These are very unexpected pictures.

GR: Maybe because there are so many of them.

RS: Both the number and the subject.

GR: The subject? Because there are children in the painting?

RS: Yes.

GR: I can't quite understand why this should be so extraordinary.

RS: It's unexpected because it seems to be very private..

GR: Very private, yes. The only difference is that I have become more shameless. I am not as ashamed anymore, and I am not afraid anymore. My fears have abated somewhat. I don't feel that I have to behave properly. Somehow I finally understood that I am allowed to do what I want.

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RS: Since 1988, when you painted the cycle of paintings about the Baader-Meinhof group, "18. Oktober 1977," there seems to have been a decided shift in your work. The color has changed, and the subject matter appears to be more personal. I'm thinking, for example, about the painting of your daughter, Betty, which was made at the same time as the Baader-Meinhof series. It's as if two sides of your mind are always working in tension with each other. How has that happened?

GR: I don't know what I should say to this! It has to do with age, perhaps. Or with time. Time necessitates it.

RS: You once said that the "Oktober" paintings were a leave-taking.

GR: But seen like that, every painting is a leave-taking. Betty, of course, was a leave-taking, as were the mother-child paintings.

RS: How so?

GR: They declare that it's over-this time, this short time.

RS: Can paintings hold time? Is this the point of making paintings?

GR: This is not the reason I make paintings, but yes, they can hold time a bit. That's why they are so attractive for us.

RS: In discussing the difference between the paintings you made from snapshots and the snapshots themselves, you referred to snapshots as devotional pictures and said the paintings were different. Where does that difference lie when you begin to paint your own life in this way?

GR: That's a real intellectual problem. Snapshots are like little devotional pieces that people have in their environment and look at. The paintings are like that a little too, but they are less private. That may be our deepest desire, not to be private. To be public, open to the world.

RS: When you speak about being open to the world in this way, I am struck by the fact that the paintings you made about the Baader-Meinhof group concern public events which prompted a deep response in you, whereas the paintings of Sabina with your child are personal in a different, intensely intimate way.

GR: Like "18. Oktober 1977," the mother-and-child paintings also provoked a lot of reactions and were very severely criticized.

RS: Really? Why?

GR: There was a crazy feminist writer in one of our best newspapers who wrote a very tough article about them. And then a paper in Basel published an answer that was very interesting about the paintings and beauty. One writer claimed that if I had painted sex and violence it would have been okay, but one isn't allowed to paint anything beautiful, whole or ideal. That's part of why people were outraged by the subject matter.

RS: They see it as sentimental or kitschy?

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GR: Yes.

RS: It is, in fact; that's why I said they are unusual paintings, because I don't know the last time that I saw an artist paint what amounts to a nativity.

GR: They are not even that beautiful. They are a little damaged, in the way I was describing before. Again I couldn't quite hold it; they are not as beautiful as Vermeer.

RS: So you went after them? Attacked them?

GR: Yes. I had no choice. I had to. I didn't want to. But I really want to make beautiful paintings.

RS: In *The Daily Practice of Painting*, many of the notes seem incredibly negative, about the futility of painting, the corruption of the art world. Is the painting actually connected to those ideas, or do you think about those ideas after the painting is done? Does the painting have its own logic, its own status?

GR: Painting is the only positive thing I have. Even if I see everything else negatively, at least in the pictures I can communicate some kind of hope. I can at least carry on.

Gerhard Richter recently showed a selection of paintings from the last five years at Marian Goodman Gallery, New York [Sept. 14-Oct. 27, 2001]. The exhibition was accompanied by a catalogue with an essay by Benjamin H.D. Buchloh. A retrospective exhibition curated by the interviewer, "Gerhard Richter: Forty Years of Painting," will appear later this winter and spring at the Museum of Modern Art, New York [Feb. 14-May 21]. It will travel to the Art Institute of Chicago [June 22-Sept. 15]; the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art [Oct. 11, 2002-Jan. 14, 2003]; the Hirshhorn Museum, Washington, D.C. [Feb. 12-May 11, 2003]; and the High Museum of Art, Atlanta [May-July 2003].

Interviewer: Robert Storr is a senior curator at the Museum of Modern Art, New York.