

A Free Course on the History of Western Art

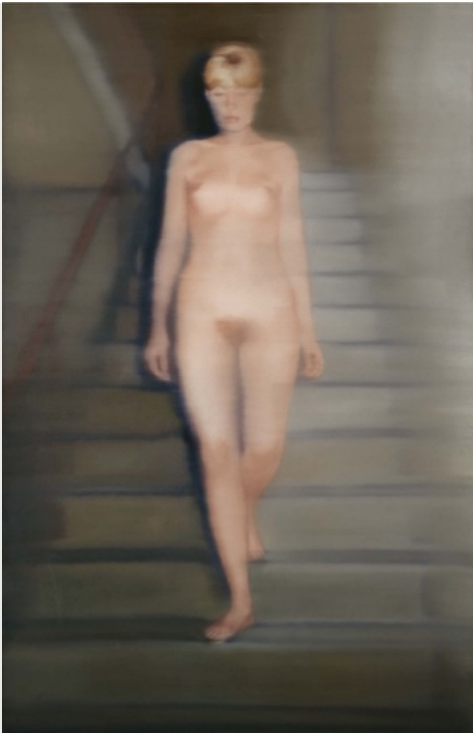
Dr Laurence Shafe www.shafe.uk



- Welcome. This is one of over 200 talks on the history of Western Art. I have arranged the talks chronologically starting with cave art through to art produced in the last few years.

GENERAL REFERENCES AND COPYRIGHT

- My talks and notes are produced with the assistance of AI systems such as Claude, Perplexity, ChatGPT, Google Gemini and Microsoft CoPilot.
- They are also based on information found on public websites such as Wikipedia, Tate, National Gallery, Louvre, The Met, Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, Khan Academy and the Art Story.
- If they use information from specific books, websites or articles these are referenced at the beginning of each talk and in the 'References' section of the relevant page. The talks that are inspired by an exhibition may use the booklets and books associated with the exhibition as a source of information.
- Where possible images and information are taken from Wikipedia under an [Attribution-Share Alike Creative Commons License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/).
- If I have forgotten to reference your work then please let me know and I will add a reference or delete the information.



61-16 GERHARD RICHTER

DR. LAURENCE SHAFE

WWW.SHAFE.UK

Gerhard Richter (b. 1932),
Ema (Akt auf einer Treppe),
1966, 200 cm x 130 cm,
Museum Ludwig, Cologne

- This is Section 61 on recent artists and this talk is on the German artist **Gerhard Richter**. He is Germany's most celebrated living artist, working across **painting, photography, and glass**. Rejecting fixed style, he moves between photorealistic grey paintings and vibrant abstract works, challenging assumptions about representation and perception. His output spans portraiture, landscape, and pure abstraction, making him one of the most influential artists of the twentieth century.

BIOGRAPHY

- **1932**. Gerhard Richter was born on 9 February 1932 in **Dresden, Germany**. His father was a **schoolteacher**; his family lived through the turbulence of the Nazi period and the Second World War. An **uncle was executed** by the Nazi regime for refusing military service, and an **aunt was killed** in a psychiatric institution under the T4 euthanasia programme — experiences that later shaped his engagement with history and memory.
- **1948–1961**. Richter studied at the Dresden Academy of Fine Arts under **Socialist Realism**, training as a muralist and stage designer. Recognising the artistic constraints of East Germany, he **defected to West Germany** in 1961, just weeks before the Berlin Wall was erected. He enrolled at the **Kunstakademie Düsseldorf**, where he encountered Fluxus, Pop Art, and Capitalist Realism alongside Sigmar Polke.
- **1962–1980s**. Richter developed his signature **Photo Paintings** — large-scale works derived from photographs, deliberately blurred to question the nature of representation. His Atlas project, begun in 1962, assembled thousands of

photographs, newspaper clippings, and sketches as a visual archive. His 1988 cycle *October 18, 1977*, depicting the deaths of the Baader-Meinhof Group, brought him international recognition for its fusion of politics and mourning.

- **1990s–present.** Richter achieved global prominence through his large-scale abstract paintings and major retrospectives worldwide. He designed stained glass windows for **Cologne Cathedral** in 2007. Married three times, he has four children. He continues to work from his studio in Cologne.

NOTES

The 15 Selected Works (Chronological Order)

1. Selbstbildnis (Self-Portrait), 1996
2. Tisch (Table), 1962
3. Ema (Akt auf einer Treppe), 1966
4. Domplatz, Mailand, 1968
5. Wolke (Cloud), 1970
6. 48 Porträts, 1971/72
7. 1024 Farben, 1973
8. Zwei Kerzen, 1982
9. Abstraktes Bild (599), 1986
10. 18. Oktober 1977, 1988
11. Betty, 1988
12. Lesende (Reader), 1994
13. S. mit Kind, 1995
14. September, 2005
15. Cologne Cathedral Window, 2007

REFERENCES

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gerhard_Richter



Gerhard Richter (b. 1932),
Selbstbildnis (Self-Portrait),
1996, 51.1 cm x 46.1 cm,
MoMA, New York

Slide 1

Gerhard Richter (b. 1932), Selbstbildnis (Self-Portrait), 1996, 51.1 cm x 46.1 cm, MoMA, New York

Imagine starting your life in a world where art is purely a tool for political propaganda. This was the reality for Gerhard Richter, born in 1932 Dresden. This 1996 self-portrait acts as a bridge, looking back at a man who spent his youth navigating the rigid constraints of Socialist Realism before fleeing to the West just months before the Berlin Wall rose.

The Ghost of the Past

Richter's early life was defined by the trauma of Nazi Germany and the subsequent Soviet occupation. His father, a teacher, was drafted into the war, returning a broken man, while his mother encouraged his creative pursuits. This portrait captures the 'Richter Blur,' a technique he developed to distance himself from the painful clarity of his origins. By blurring the image, he creates a sense of detachment, suggesting that the truth is often found in the hazy margins of memory rather than in sharp, defined details.

A Life Between Two Worlds

The critical reception of Richter's work often focuses on his refusal to adopt a singular style. One critic noted,

"Richter's paintings are windows into a world that refuses to be seen clearly."

This ambiguity was a radical departure from the state-sanctioned art of his youth.

The Great Erasure

A sensational fact about Richter is that upon arriving in the West, he burned almost all the paintings he produced in the East. He viewed them as ideological baggage, choosing instead to start his official catalogue from scratch.

How much of our identity is shaped by what we choose to remember, and how much by what we purposefully forget?

Pronunciation Guide: Selbst-bild-nis (ZELPST-bilt-nis).

References:

- Image: MoMA <https://www.moma.org/collection/works/80397>
- Wikipedia: Gerhard Richter
- The Art Story: Richter
- Tate: Richter's Early Life
- Gagosian: Gerhard Richter



Gerhard Richter (b. 1932), *Tisch (Table)*, 1962, 90 cm x 113 cm, Private Collection

Slide 2

Gerhard Richter (b. 1932), *Tisch (Table)*, 1962, 90 cm x 113 cm, Private Collection

How does an artist announce a total revolution with something as mundane as a piece of furniture? *Tisch* is not just a painting; it is "Number 1" in Richter's catalogue raisonné. It represents the moment he stopped trying to paint like a Western modernist and started painting like a man who had finally found his own voice by embracing the "anti-style" of photography.

The Birth of the Blur

In *Tisch*, Richter took a newspaper clipping of a designer table and painted it with painstaking detail, only to partially dissolve the image with a broad, sweeping brushstroke. This was his "Aha!" moment. He realized that by cancelling out the subject, he could force the viewer to look at the paint itself. He wasn't painting a table; he was painting a picture of a table.

A Scandalous Indifference

Early critics were baffled by his lack of "painterly" emotion. Richter famously stated:

"I steer clear of every specific meaning. I don't want my pictures to have a message."

This cold, mechanical approach was seen by some as a cynical rejection of art's soul.

Capitalist Realism

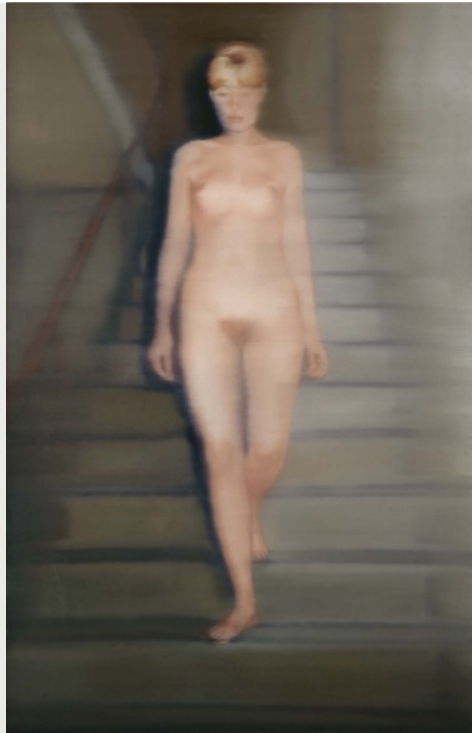
During this period, Richter and his friends launched "Capitalist Realism." In a sensational piece of performance art, they staged an exhibition in a furniture store, sitting on sofas as "living sculptures" to mock the consumerist obsession of West Germany.

What if the most honest way to depict reality is to show how easily it can be wiped away by a single stroke?

Pronunciation Guide: Tisch (Tish).

References:

- Image: Gerhard Richter Official Site
- Wikipedia: Tisch
- The Guardian: Richter's Tables
- MoMA: Capitalist Realism
- Met Museum: Richter's Early Works



Gerhard Richter (b. 1932),
Ema (Akt auf einer Treppe),
1966, 200 cm x 130 cm,
Museum Ludwig, Cologne

Slide 3

Gerhard Richter (b. 1932), *Ema (Akt auf einer Treppe)*, 1966, 200 cm x 130 cm, Museum Ludwig, Cologne

Is it possible to be both deeply personal and completely detached at the same time? *Ema* is one of Richter's most iconic "photo-paintings." It depicts his first wife, Marianne "Ema" Eufinger, descending a staircase. While it looks like a soft-focus photograph, it is a massive oil painting that challenges the very history of modern art by nodding directly to Marcel Duchamp.

A Secular Madonna

Richter's *Ema* subverts the scandal of Duchamp's *Nude Descending a Staircase*. While Duchamp broke the body into mechanical fragments, Richter restores the human form but wraps it in a mysterious, glowing haze. The symbolism here is one of transition—Ema is moving, caught between the shadows of the background and the light of the foreground, embodying the fleeting nature of beauty.

The Soft Focus Critique

Critics were struck by the painting's ethereal quality. One reviewer famously remarked:

"Richter makes the camera seem like an imprecise tool, and the paintbrush like a lens of truth."

It was seen as a bold reclaiming of the "human" in an era dominated by pop art.

The Apartment Stairwell

A little-known fact is that this wasn't staged in a professional studio. Richter photographed Ema in the stairwell of their modest Düsseldorf apartment. He was so pleased with the result that this became his first photo-painting in colour, marking a major technical shift in his career.

Can a blur actually provide more clarity about how we perceive our loved ones than a sharp, high-definition photograph ever could?

Pronunciation Guide: Ema (AY-ma), Akt auf einer Treppe (AKT owf eye-ner TREP-peh).

References:

- Image: Museum Ludwig
- Wikipedia: Ema (Nude on a Staircase)
- Tate: Richter's Technique
- Artnet: The Story of Ema
- Gerhard Richter: Official Biography

These next three slides examine Richter's mastery of scale, his ironic approach to the natural world, and his confrontational engagement with history and cultural authority.

<https://www.davidzwirner.com/artworks/gerhard-richter-ema-akf-auf-einer-treppe-ema-nude-on-a-staircase--7e337>

<https://www.museum-ludwig.de/en/ausstellungen/archiv/2022/presentation-of-the-gerhard-richter-collection>



Gerhard Richter (b. 1932), *Domplatz, Mailand*, 1968, 275 cm x 290 cm, Private Collection

Slide 4

Gerhard Richter (b. 1932), *Domplatz, Mailand*, 1968, 275 cm x 290 cm, Private Collection

Have you ever felt completely dwarfed by the sheer scale of a city? This monumental work, *Domplatz, Mailand*, captures that sensation of urban vertigo. Commissioned for a corporate office, it remains one of Richter's most ambitious photo-paintings, turning a bustling Italian square into a ghostly, vibrating vision of modern life.

The Architecture of Disappearance

Richter uses his signature "blur" to transform solid stone into something fluid. By painting from a photograph and dragging a dry brush across the wet surface, he suggests the city is not a static place but a series of fleeting moments. The cathedral isn't a monument to faith; it's a looming presence that feels overwhelming in its hazy, grey indifference.

A Record-Breaking Ghost

Critically, the work is a pinnacle of his early style. When it sold for \$37 million in 2013, it set a record for a living artist. Critic Don Thompson noted:

"Richter's *Mailand* is the bridge between the precision of the past and the uncertainty of the future."

It proved that "blurred" art could carry immense weight and value.

The Corporate Canvas

Interestingly, this masterpiece was originally commissioned by the electronics giant Siemens for their Milan offices. In 1968, as student protests rocked Europe, Richter was painting a symbol of established power and tradition, yet doing so in a way that made it feel like it was dissolving right before the viewer's eyes.

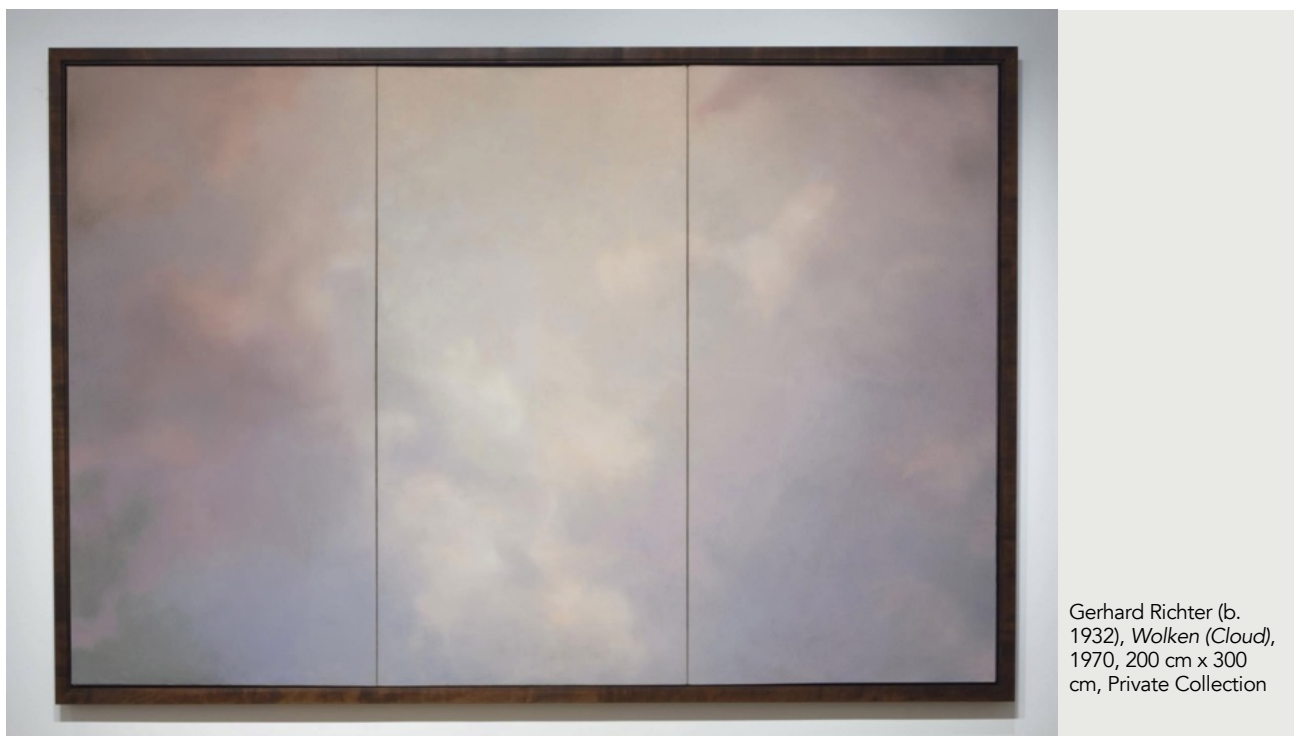
What happens to our shared sense of history when the landmarks we trust begin to fade into the background of a world that is constantly in flux and ever changing nowadays?

Pronunciation Guide: Dom-platz, MY-lant (Cathedral Square, Milan).

References:

- Image: Gerhard Richter Official Site
- Sotheby's: Domplatz, Mailand Record
- Wikipedia: Domplatz, Mailand
- The Art Newspaper: Richter Market
- Tate: Richter's Urban Landscapes

<https://www.davidzwirner.com/artworks/gerhard-richter-domplatz-mailand-cathedral-square-milan--bf76e>



Gerhard Richter (b. 1932), *Wolken (Cloud)*, 1970, 200 cm x 300 cm, Private Collection

Slide 5

Gerhard Richter (b. 1932), *Wolken (Cloud)*, 1970, 200 cm x 300 cm, Private Collection, sold at Christies 11 May 2011 for \$5 million

Is nature ever just "nature," or is it always a reflection of what we want to see? In *Wolke*, Richter tackles the most cliché subject in art history—the cloud—and strips it of its romantic soul. It's a work that asks why we find certain things beautiful and whether that beauty is actually a lie.

The Irony of the Sublime

Unlike the Romantic painters of the 19th century who saw God in the sky, Richter views clouds as "meaningless." By painting them with photographic precision and then softening the edges, he creates an image that is "too perfect." It's a simulation of nature. He is not celebrating the heavens; he is documenting our desire to find meaning in a chaotic atmosphere.

The Beautiful Void

Critics often struggle with Richter's landscapes because they are "falsely" beautiful. As curator Robert Storr observed:

"Richter's clouds are portraits of nothingness, painted with a devotion that borders on the religious."

This tension between the technique's beauty and the subject's emptiness is the core of the work's power.

Constructing the Sky

A little-known fact is that these clouds are often "fakes." Richter used his Atlas—a massive collection of source photos—to combine different skies into one composition. The cloud you see never actually existed in that form. He was "Photoshopping" with oil paint decades before the technology existed.

If we can find total peace in a sky that is artificially constructed, does the true authenticity of the "real" world even matter anymore, or are we now satisfied with an illusion of a heaven that has no actual physical existence?

Pronunciation Guide: VOL-keh (Cloud).

References:

- Image: Gerhard Richter Official Site
- MoMA: Richter Landscapes
- Wikipedia: Atlas (Gerhard Richter)
- Christie's: Richter Landscapes
<https://www.christies.com/en/lot/lot-5437831>
- Artnet: The Beauty of Richter



Gerhard Richter (b. 1932), 48 Porträts, 1971/72, 48 panels each 70 cm x 55 cm, Museum Ludwig, Cologne

Slide 6

Gerhard Richter (b. 1932), 48 Porträts, 1971/72, 48 panels each 70 cm x 55 cm, Museum Ludwig, Cologne

Who defines greatness, and what happens when that definition is narrowed down to a single demographic? 48 Porträts is a provocative installation that confronts the viewer with a wall of white male faces—philosophers, composers, and scientists. It is a work that feels like a tombstone for a specific kind of European intellectualism.

The Grid of Genius

Richter selected these figures from encyclopedias, choosing men like Kafka, Stravinsky, and Einstein. By painting them in a uniform, grey, blurred style and arranging them in a rigid sequence, he strips away their individual achievements. They become a "species" of greatness rather than individuals, highlighting how history is often curated and presented as an unquestionable, monolithic truth.

The Absence of the Other

The critical reception was immediate and sharp, particularly regarding the total exclusion of women and non-Europeans. Richter later reflected on this, stating: "I was looking for a specific kind of father figure that I never had."

The work is now viewed as a profound critique of the patriarchal structures that dominated his upbringing in post-war Germany.

A Pavilion Divided

This work was created specifically for the German Pavilion at the 1972 Venice Biennale. At a time when Germany was still grappling with its Nazi past, presenting a "master race" of intellectuals was a daring, almost dangerous move that forced the public to confront the nature of authority and cultural heritage.

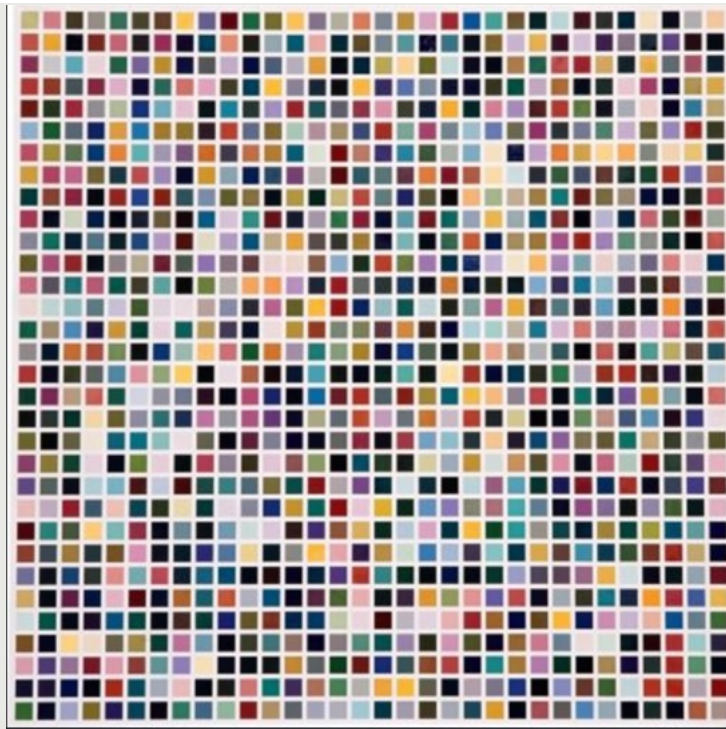
How much of our universal history is actually just a carefully selected gallery of specific faces, and what does their silent, blurred gaze tell us about the power of those who are left out?

Pronunciation Guide: por-TRAYTS (Portraits).

References:

- Image: Museum Ludwig
- Wikipedia: 48 Portraits
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/48_Portraits
- Tate: Richter and History
- Venice Biennale: German Pavilion
- Gagosian: Richter Portraits

This batch explores Richter's transition from strict representations into the world of industrial colour, the haunting silence of his candle paintings, and the energetic "squeegee" abstracts that redefined the medium.



Gerhard Richter (b. 1932), *1024 Farben*, 1973, 299 x 299 cm, Kunstmuseen Krefeld, Krefeld, Germany

Slide 7

Gerhard Richter (b. 1932), *1024 Farben*, 1973, 299 x 299 cm, Kunstmuseen Krefeld, Krefeld, Germany

Ever found yourself paralysed by the endless rows of colour swatches at a DIY shop?

The Democracy of Colour

Richter's *1024 Farben* is the ultimate expression of this everyday indecision. By taking the logic of a commercial paint chart and expanding it to a monumental scale, he stripped all colour of its traditional emotional weight. Here, no red is "angrier" than a blue is "calmer"; they are simply mathematical values arranged in a grid. This was a truly radical rejection of the Expressionist idea that colour should reveal the artist's soul.

A Machine-Like Precision

The reception was one of profound scepticism. Critics wondered if art had finally been replaced by industry. As historian Benjamin Buchloh noted:

"Richter's colour charts are the first paintings to accept the total loss of the authorial subject."

It was seen as a cold, almost mechanical way of making art, yet the sheer scale created a surprisingly immersive, almost spiritual experience.

Post-War Logic

Created in 1973, this work reflects a society obsessed with systems and order as a

shield against the chaotic trauma of the past. For Richter, the grid provided a safe, neutral structure where he could experiment without the burden of "meaning."

The Power of Chance

Interestingly, the arrangement of these 1024 squares was determined by a random number generator. Richter wanted to remove his own taste from the equation entirely.

How much of what we collectively consider "beautiful" is merely a result of a system we have all been trained to implicitly accept?

Pronunciation Guide: FAR-ben (Colours).

References:

- Image: MoMA
- Wikipedia: 1024 Colours
- Tate: Colour Charts
- Guggenheim: Richter's Abstraction
- Gerhard Richter Official: 1024 Farben

<https://www.christies.com/en/lot/lot-3820160>



Gerhard Richter (b. 1932), *Zwei Kerzen (Two Candles)*, 1982, 121.9 × 101.6 cm, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art

Slide 8

Gerhard Richter (b. 1932), *Zwei Kerzen (Two Candles)*, 1982, 121.9 × 101.6 cm, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art

Why does the flickering flame of a candle still captivate us in an age of neon and LED?

A Modern Vanitas

Zwei Kerzen is a haunting return to the Vanitas tradition of the 17th century—a reminder of the fleeting nature of life. By using his blurred photo-painting technique, Richter makes the candles look like they are vibrating, caught in the moment of burning out. The light is soft, intimate, and deeply melancholic, contrasting sharply with the cold, conceptual grids of his previous years.

The Silence of the Candle

Contemporary critics were moved by its quiet intensity. In a world of loud, aggressive art, this work felt like a prayer. One critic remarked:

"Richter paints the light of the soul without ever mentioning the word 'God'."

It was a bridge between secular modernism and a buried, ancient sense of the sacred.

Cold War Mourning

In 1982, Germany was the frontline of the Cold War. These candles were painted at a time of immense social anxiety. For many, they symbolised a vigil for a divided nation and a silent protest against the threat of war.

Pop Culture Immortality

A little-known fact is that this image became a symbol of "cool" when the band Sonic Youth used it for their Daydream Nation album cover. Richter, initially hesitant, eventually embraced how his high-art memento mori had entered the grimy rock world.

In a world that never stops shouting, is there still a place for the quiet, flickering truth of a single, fragile flame?

Pronunciation Guide: Tsvy KERT-sen (Two Candles).

References:

- Image: Gerhard Richter Official
- Wikipedia: Zwei Kerzen
- Tate: Richter's Candles
- San Francisco Museum of Modern Art: Two Candles
<https://www.sfmoma.org/artwork/FC.306/>
- Sonic Youth: Daydream Nation Cover



Gerhard Richter (b. 1932),
Abstraktes Bild, 1986, 225
× 200 cm, sold at Christies
10 May 2022 for \$38
million

Slide 9

Gerhard Richter (b. 1932), *Abstraktes Bild*, 1986, 225 × 200 cm, sold at Christies 10 May 2022 for \$38 million

Have you ever wanted to take a giant eraser to a mistake and found that the smudge left behind was more beautiful than the original drawing?

The Squeegee Revolution

Abstraktes Bild (599) marks the peak of Richter's technique: the use of a massive, rubber-tipped squeegee to drag wet oil paint across the canvas. He layers bright, jarring colours and then partially scrapes them away, revealing the previous layers beneath. This process is a dance between creation and destruction, where the artist loses control to the physics of the paint.

Controlled Chaos

Critics were fascinated by how Richter could make abstraction feel

"photographic." As Peter Schjeldahl of *The New Yorker* famously put it:

"Richter's abstracts are pictures of the act of painting itself, frozen in a state of glorious, high-speed collision."

The work was praised for its ability to look simultaneously planned and completely accidental.

A Mid-Life Pivot

By 1986, Richter was fifty-four and seeking a way to move beyond the limitations of the photograph. This shift into "Free Abstraction" was a personal liberation,

allowing him to work with pure colour and texture without the baggage of a literal subject.

Painting as Archaeology

Sensational is the fact that some of these canvases have fifty layers of paint. Richter doesn't know what the final image will look like until the very last scrape of the squeegee.

If we can find meaning in a series of beautiful accidents, does the original "intent" of the artist really and truly matter in the end?

Pronunciation Guide: Ab-strakt-es Bilt (Abstract Picture).

References:

- Image: Art Institute of Chicago
- Wikipedia: Abstraktes Bild
- Gerhard Richter Official: Abstract Paintings
- Tate: The Squeegee Technique
- MoMA: Richter's Abstraction

This next set of slides moves into Richter's most emotionally and politically charged territory. We look at how he handled the trauma of German terrorism, the intimate mystery of his daughter's gaze, and his response to the defining tragedy of the 21st century.



Gerhard Richter (b. 1932), 18. Oktober 1977 (Dead/Tote), 1988, 62 cm x 62 cm (part of a 15-canvas cycle), MoMA, New York

Slide 10

Gerhard Richter (b. 1932), 18. Oktober 1977 (Dead/Tote), 1988, 62 cm x 62 cm (part of a 15-canvas cycle), MoMA, New York

Can art help a nation heal from a wound it's still trying to hide? In 1988, Richter shocked Germany by painting the members of the Baader-Meinhof group (the Red Army Faction), a radical terrorist organization whose leaders died in prison under mysterious circumstances.

The Silence of Grey

This series, 18. Oktober 1977, is almost entirely monochrome. By using blurry, low-contrast greys based on police photos and newspaper clippings, Richter removes any sense of "action" or "glamour." He isn't celebrating these people; he is documenting the cold, quiet aftermath of ideological failure. The "blur" here acts as a veil of mourning and a refusal to give easy answers.

A National Scandal

The reception was explosive. Critics on the left thought he was aestheticizing terrorists; critics on the right thought he was humanizing criminals. As curator Robert Storr noted:

"Richter did not paint the ideology; he painted the end of it—the literal, physical dead end of a generation's radicalism."

The work forced Germany to look at a dark chapter it was desperately trying to forget.

Painting the "Unpaintable"

Richter kept these images in his studio for years before showing them. He felt that the medium of painting, with its historical weight, was the only way to give these fleeting, gritty news photos the "gravity" they deserved.

If an artist depicts a villain with soft edges and quiet light, are they asking us to forgive the person, or simply to acknowledge the tragedy of their existence?

Pronunciation Guide: Acht-tsayn Ok-TO-ber (October 18th).

References:

- Image: MoMA Collection
<https://www.moma.org/collection/works/79037>
- Wikipedia: 18. Oktober 1977
- Gerhard Richter Official: 18. October 1977
- The Guardian: Richter's Terrorist Cycle
- Tate: Richter and Politics



Gerhard Richter (b. 1932),
Betty, 1988, 102 cm x 72 cm,
Saint Louis Art Museum

Slide 11

Gerhard Richter (b. 1932), *Betty*, 1988, 102 cm x 72 cm, Saint Louis Art Museum

What is more intriguing: a face that tells all, or a back that hides everything? *Betty* is arguably Richter's most famous portrait, yet it is a portrait that refuses to show us the subject's face.

The Turn Away

The painting depicts Richter's daughter, Betty, turning her head away from the viewer toward one of her father's own grey abstract paintings. The contrast is startling: her hyper-realistic red and white floral cardigan against the cold, dark background. It is a masterpiece of "looking at someone looking." By hiding her face, Richter makes her universal—she becomes a symbol of the next generation looking back at the past.

The Illusion of Reality

At first glance, many viewers mistake this for a photograph. Richter's technical skill here is at its peak. As critic Jerry Saltz famously said:

"*Betty* is a ghost of a girl, a painting that proves Richter can out-paint the camera while making us wish the camera had never been invented."

The "blur" here is so subtle it's almost invisible, creating a haunting, dreamlike clarity.

A Personal Pivot

Painted in the same year as the grim 18. Oktober 1977 series, *Betty* acts as its

emotional opposite. While the terrorist cycle dealt with death and the state, Betty deals with life and the family. It's as if Richter needed to paint his daughter to remind himself that beauty still existed.

The Secret Gaze

There is an earlier portrait of Betty from 1977 where she faces the camera. By 1988, she has turned away. Some suggest this represents the daughter's growing independence, or perhaps the artist's own realization that he can never truly "know" another person.

When someone turns away from us, do we feel more distant from them, or does it make us want to understand them even more?

Pronunciation Guide: BET-tee.

References:

- Image: Saint Louis Art Museum
<https://www.slam.org/collection/objects/23250/>
- Wikipedia: Betty (painting)
- Gerhard Richter Official: Betty
- The New York Times: Richter's Betty
- Artnet: The Mystery of Betty



Gerhard Richter (b. 1932),
September, 2005, 52 cm x
72 cm, MoMA, New York

Slide 12

Gerhard Richter (b. 1932), September, 2005, 52 cm x 72 cm, MoMA, New York

- How do you paint an event that has already been seen by billions of people on screen? Four years after the 9/11 attacks, Richter finally addressed the tragedy, but he did so on a surprisingly small, intimate scale.
- **The Smudge of History**
 - September shows the World Trade Center at the moment of impact. However, Richter has used his squeegee to scrape horizontal lines of grey and blue across the image, partially "erasing" the explosion. This technique mimics the way our brains try to process trauma—we see it, then we try to blur it out or push it away. The painting isn't about the event itself; it's about the memory of the event.
- **Rejecting the Spectacle**
 - Critics praised Richter for avoiding the "sensationalism" of the 9/11 imagery. By making the painting small (about the size of a computer monitor), he forces the viewer to step close, turning a global catastrophe into a private moment of reflection. As the artist himself said:
 - "I wanted to paint the horror, but I found that painting it directly was impossible. I had to hide it to make it visible."
- **The Grey Ground**
 - The colours are muted—the grey of concrete and the blue of a perfect autumn

sky. By using the same squeegee method he uses for his "pure" abstracts, he bridges the gap between his two styles. He proves that even a random "smudge" can carry the weight of world history.

- **The Failed First Attempt**

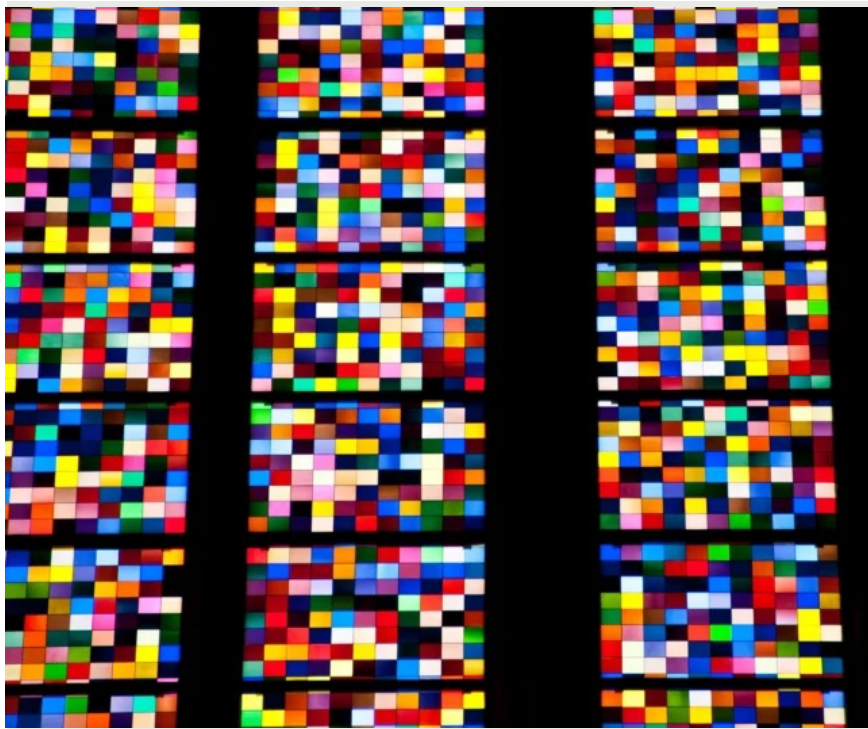
- Richter actually tried to paint this image in bright, realistic colours first, but he found it "too decorative" and "wrong." He almost destroyed the canvas before deciding to scrape it down into the haunting, ghostly version we see today.
- If we can only handle tragedy when it is "blurred" or distanced, does that mean art's job is to protect us from the truth, or to help us survive it?
- We conclude this journey with Richter's late-career move into the monumental and the monumental silence. From the pixelated light of a cathedral to the heavy, layered shadows of the Holocaust, these final works cement his status as the artist who saved painting from its own obsolescence.

PRONUNCIATION GUIDE:

zep-TEM-ber.

REFERENCES:

- Image: MoMA <https://www.moma.org/collection/works/125098>
- Wikipedia: September (Richter)
- Gerhard Richter Official: September
- The New Yorker: Richter's September
- Book: 'September: A History' by Robert Storr



Gerhard Richter (b. 1932),
*Richter-Fenster (Cologne
Cathedral Window)*, 2007, 113
square metres, Cologne
Cathedral, Germany

Slide 13

Gerhard Richter (b. 1932), *Richter-Fenster (Cologne Cathedral Window)*, 2007, 113 square metres, Cologne Cathedral, Germany

Can an atheist create a spiritual masterpiece? In 2007, Richter unveiled a work that replaced a 19th-century window destroyed in World War II. Instead of saints or biblical scenes, he offered the church 11,500 squares of hand-blown glass in 72 different colours.

A Pixelated God

The arrangement of the glass was determined by a computer program, though Richter "tuned" the results to ensure symmetry and balance. The effect is a shimmering, kaleidoscopic wall of light that changes throughout the day. It doesn't tell a story; it creates an atmosphere. It is the "colour chart" paintings (Slide 7) taken to their ultimate, divine conclusion.

The Sacred vs. The Secular

The reception was divided. While many hailed it as a triumph of modern art in a medieval space, the conservative Cardinal Joachim Meisner famously boycotted the unveiling, stating the window belonged in a "mosque or a prayer house," not a Catholic cathedral. He wanted faces; Richter gave him pure light.

A Gift to the City

Despite the controversy, Richter refused a fee for the project, gifting the design to the city of Cologne, where he has lived since 1983. It has since become one of the most visited sites in the city.

In a world of specific dogmas and rigid beliefs, is a "random" arrangement of light more honest than a picture of a saint?

Pronunciation Guide: RIK-ter FEN-ster.

References:

- Image: Cologne Cathedral Official Site
- Wikipedia: Richter Window
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cologne_Cathedral_Window
- Gerhard Richter Official: Cologne Cathedral Window
- The Guardian: Richter's Cathedral Window
- BBC: The Controversy of the Cologne Window



Gerhard Richter (b. 1932), *Birkenau*, 2014, 4 panels each 260 cm x 200 cm, Reichstag, Berlin (on loan from the Artist)

Slide 14

Gerhard Richter (b. 1932), *Birkenau*, 2014, 4 panels each 260 cm x 200 cm, Reichstag, Berlin (on loan from the Artist)

How do you paint the "unpaintable" horror of the Holocaust? For decades, Richter struggled with this question. In 2014, he produced *Birkenau*, four massive canvases that represent his final major statement in oil painting.

The Hidden History

Underneath these dense, scratched layers of grey, red, and black paint lie four sketches Richter made from secret photographs taken by a prisoner (a *Sonderkommando*) at the Birkenau death camp. Richter felt that a literal painting of the photos would be voyeuristic and inadequate. So, he used his squeegee to layer and scrape the paint until the images were completely obscured.

The Presence of Absence

The work is a "monument to the invisible." By hiding the source images, he forces us to confront the fact that we cannot truly "see" or understand the Holocaust. As critic Benjamin Buchloh observed:

"Richter's *Birkenau* is not a representation of the camps, but a record of the impossibility of representing them."

A Permanent Reminder

Richter has refused to sell these paintings, placing them on long-term loan to the German Parliament (the Reichstag) in Berlin. They hang opposite his glass work

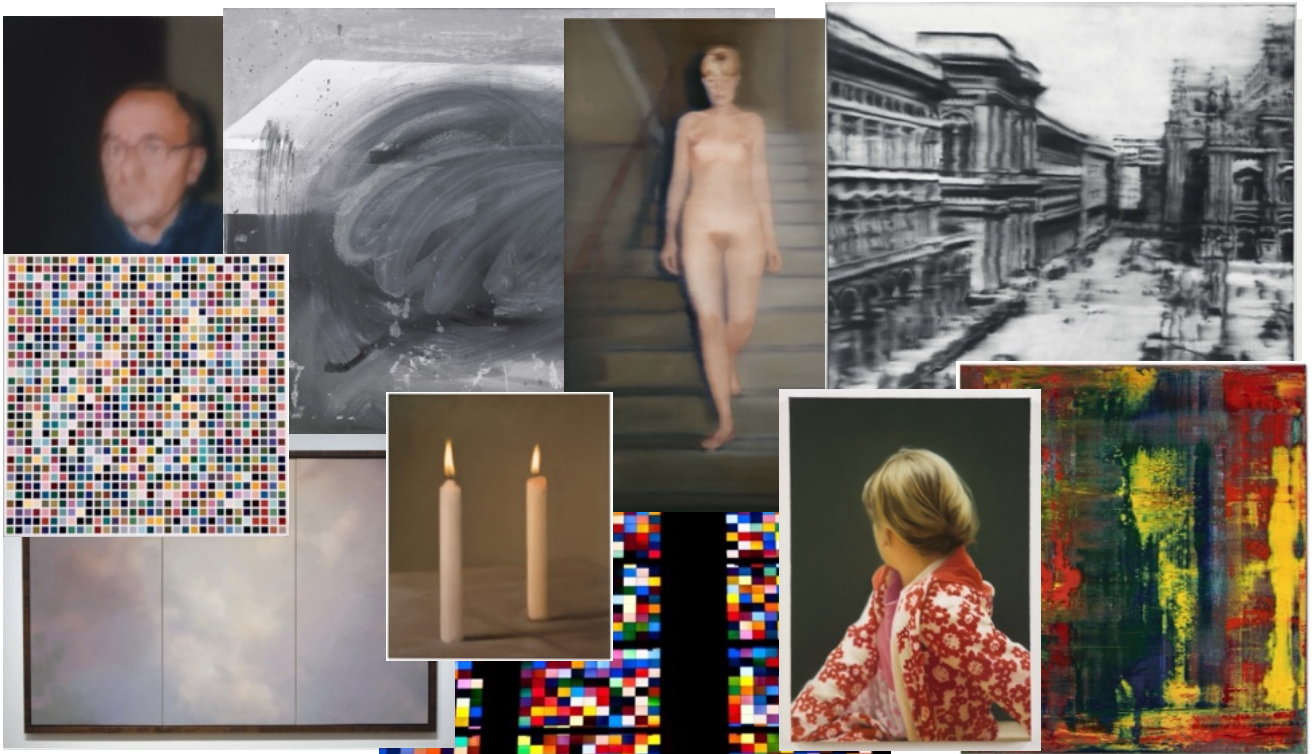
Black, Red, Gold, creating a space for reflection on German identity and responsibility.

If an image is so painful that it must be covered up to be endured, does the act of painting it become a form of burial or a form of remembrance?

Pronunciation Guide: BEER-ken-ow.

References:

- Image: Gerhard Richter Official
- Wikipedia: Birkenau (Gerhard Richter)
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Birkenau_\(painting\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Birkenau_(painting))
- The New York Times: Richter's Birkenau
- Met Museum: Gerhard Richter - Painting After All
- Spiegel: Richter and the Holocaust



Slide 15

The Legacy of Gerhard Richter: The Chameleon of Modern Art

[Collage image of Richter's varied styles: Photo-painting, Colour Chart, Squeegee Abstract]

In 2017, at the age of 85, Gerhard Richter announced his retirement from oil painting. Having spent six decades dismantling every "rule" of the medium, he left behind a legacy that redefined what it means to be an artist in the modern age.

Summary of Influence

- The Blur: He taught us that "truth" is never sharp; it's always vibrating, fading, and subjective.
- The Multi-Style Approach: He destroyed the idea that an artist must have one "signature" style. He proved you could be a realist, an abstractionist, and a conceptualist all at once.
- The Authority of the Photograph: He bridged the gap between the "high art" of painting and the "low art" of the snapshot, showing how they influence and distort each other.

A Master of Uncertainty

Richter's greatest contribution is his refusal to offer easy answers. Whether painting his daughter, a terrorist, or a patch of grey, his work is rooted in scepticism. He famously said:

"I have no program, no system, no strategy... I only have a certain desire to find out what is."

Legacy Today

Today, Richter is one of the world's most successful living artists, with his works appearing in every major museum on earth. His influence can be seen in the "hauntological" paintings of Luc Tuymans, the energetic layers of Adrian Ghenie, and the way we all view images in our "blurred" digital world.

Conclusion

Gerhard Richter's life's work is a testament to the power of looking. He didn't just paint pictures; he painted the act of seeing. He reminded us that in a world of constant images, the most important thing we can do is stop, look closer, and admit how little we actually know.



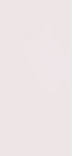
61-16 GERHARD RICHTER

DR. LAURENCE SHAFE

WWW.SHAFE.UK

Gerhard Richter (b. 1932),
Betty, 1988, 102 cm x 72 cm,
Saint Louis Art Museum

- That brings me to the end of today's talk. Thank you for your interest, time and attention and I look forward to recording the next talk in my overview of Western Art.



A Free Course on the History of Western Art

Dr Laurence Shafe www.shafe.uk

