

Interview

Dr. Dietmar Elger

Art journalist Stefan Koldehoff interviews Dr. Dietmar Elger, head of the Gerhard Richter Archive in Dresden, about the behind-the-scenes work involved in producing the comprehensive catalogue raisonné of Gerhard Richter's paintings and sculptures.

There is already a series of Gerhard Richter catalogue raisonnés: the legendary first one, which you yourself compiled in 1986 for an exhibition at the Düsseldorf Kunsthalle; the Bundeskunsthalle catalogue in 1993 was a continuation of that, and then shorter publications added on to it. Why another catalogue raisonné now?

Because none of them—with the exception of the Düsseldorf catalogue—were based in scientific research. Instead, they were uncommented surveys of the art, compiled and designed by Gerhard Richter himself, all the way down to the layout. None of them contain any extensive information about the works, however. In 1986, the owner, the exhibitions, and the literature were listed, but at Richter's suggestion, I wrote in the foreword that all of the paintings were numbered on the back. Of course, that's not true. So it was really becoming urgently necessary to first update the catalogue, and, second, to make it more scientific, to provide additional information—the provenance, for instance—to update the whereabouts of each work, and to add as much information as possible about exhibitions and literature, as well as some commentary and comparable works.

Had any preliminary work been completed in Richter's studio? Was there a card index, for example, or even computer data?

No, nothing. Richter has always numbered his works, noted the year each piece was made and its size, and listed them accordingly. This list often noted where the paintings had gone. The trail frequently ended, however, with the galleries that acquired them from the studio—with Anthony d'Offay, Marian Goodman, or Fred Jahn.

Were these surveys a way for him to ascertain for himself what he had made?

Yes, precisely. This still goes on in the studio. Richter keeps a list, with small pictures, which are glued onto cardboard, and in this way he maintains a good overview of his body of work.

Compared to the first catalogue, you have been able to add many early exhibitions, astonishingly enough. Were they not on the radar in 1986?

I missed a lot that time. The fact that I can make additions now has to do with the amount of time that I now have for research, of course. The catalogue at that time was produced within a year and a half. In the meanwhile, there are now other ways to conduct research—over the Internet, as well as in libraries. The Internet has also made the process of searching for second-hand catalogues far more effective than it used to be. In 1986 I thought I had found everything. I was quickly disappointed, because I realized that some things were indeed missing. I would say that I've discovered at least twice as many early group shows as I had for the 1986 catalogue.

How difficult is it to reconstruct the provenance? Are private collectors and dealers forthcoming with names? Do you run into obstacles quickly?

That's something that can't be fully reconstructed for any artist. There were two points when I myself doubted that I would be able to gather sufficient information on the work of Gerhard Richter: one had to do with the provenances, and the other with collecting information about notations on the backs of paintings, because I had to rely on receiving this information from the owners, especially private collectors. Ultimately, I was surprised that both of these sticking points were overcome.

So collectors took their Richters down from the wall and had a look, for your sake?

Some actually did. By the way, even though the research at museums is organized in a far more professional manner, it was still often not much easier. I found some information in my old papers from 1986; I hadn't used it at the time. For about eight years now, I've been running around to all of the art fairs; everyone knows me as the guy who always wants to photograph the backs of the paintings. In the meantime, I've taken pictures of the backs of more than six hundred works of art.

Why is that so interesting?

There are abstract works, for example, where the numbers go in two directions on the back side, so the painting can be hung one way, or the other. There are titles that deviate from the known titles. There are still names used as titles on the back of some portraits, for example, which Richter then later decided to make anonymous.

And which title did you choose, then?

The one in the artist's list of works. Even if he sometimes deviated from earlier titles, or if the paintings had been exhibited under different titles. In the catalogue commentary I point out these kinds of changes.

Were you able to correct misunderstandings this way?

Yes, and there were some—about a car, for example. The painting is called Alfa Romeo (mit Text) (Alfa Romeo [with text]), but it's not an Alfa, it's a Corvette. An auto expert brought that to my attention. He had even found the source photo for the painting in an auto magazine. This photo is reprinted in the catalogue raisonné. Still, in that case, I kept Richter's original title. On the other hand, I was able to correct lots of dates, for instance, because I'd found out that the magazines from which the pictures were taken were not published until after the year the painting was supposedly done; other paintings were precisely dated, down to the very day, on the back—except that the year was different from the one that had been previously accepted.

Also, works once considered lost reappeared . . .

Several—a Soraya painting, for example. I knew that this work existed, but there was not even a photograph of it. A couple of months ago, a gallery let me know that they were dealing with the estate of the former owner. And now there is not only a photo, but the complete provenance, as well. When the first owner heard about it, he tried to buy the painting back. A strange, pink painting . . . All in all, about ten percent of the first volume alone consists of previously unknown or additional works or paintings, which are reproduced here for the first time.

An astonishing number of current owners agreed to be mentioned by name.

More in America than over here in Europe. There's a cultural difference. Many of the smaller collectors are naturally more sensitive than the big international collectors. I can imagine why, too. There are collectors who bought a painting straight from the studio in the 1960s. Today, you can sometimes walk into astonishingly modest homes and there on the wall is an Uecker, a Graubner, or a Richter. Naturally, these owners do not want this to be made public.

You also wrote Richter's biography in 2002, coming very close to Gerhard Richter, the man, in the process. Now it is primarily about the work. Have you also learned something new about Richter as a person, through his paintings?

I've learned a great deal about the way he deals with his own work—about his decision, for instance, not to take various paintings into his oeuvre. There are missing Richter paintings, because my work, after all, is not a "catalogue raisonné of the paintings," but a "catalogue raisonné of the numbered works." And a work only gets a number if Richter acknowledges the work. This is a block of works determined by the artist—mainly, of course, oil paintings on canvas and objects, as well as oil on paper, pencil on canvas, pencil on paper—some of these works are also numbered. For Richter, they all have a certain artistic value. And he has also decided against certain works, so they haven't been numbered.

For example?

Some of them are gifts he's given. Also things that he actually wanted to throw away, but then someone said, give it to me. In the 1960s he was, on occasion, too generous and answered,

then take it. Later, these products came onto the market. In these cases, if the auction houses requested a number, Richter of course refused to give one.

There is, however, also a series of works that someone received.

Sometimes Richter simply forgot them. On the other hand, there are also paintings on his list that have a number, but which are marked as destroyed—although obviously, they have not been.

Can an unnumbered painting still be a valid Richter painting?

I'm sometimes asked that, and I pass the question on to Richter. My answer to the owner then is often: Gerhard Richter does not dispute the fact that the painting is by him. But that doesn't mean he's going to give it a number.

How does the market react to that?

Even these paintings are sold. There is, for instance, a nude, not a beautiful painting, irritatingly sweet. Nevertheless, it was auctioned off at a high price. In the meantime the painting has also been numbered.

For many years it was always said that motifs were not really important to Gerhard Richter—many are coincidental finds from magazines or newspapers. His Atlas is documented this way, too. In point of fact, he is mainly concerned with the issue of what painting is capable of doing. In past years, however, there have been more attempts to interpret Richter's paintings autobiographically. Is that a correct approach?

Yes, I've done that myself, sometimes. If you have a variety of photos in front of you, and decide to paint one of them, then that's probably not just a random decision. There's also some background behind it, but as the observer, you don't necessarily have to know it. Take the painting of the dryer: a black-and-white painting within a painting, a painting with text, with a price, where the commercial aspect is included, something that Richter liked to have in paintings in those days, similar to the Pop of Art of an Andy Warhol, say. And yet there is a second level: at some time he once said that the photo scared him, because it was exactly the same kind of dryer that he had had in his one-room apartment in those days. But nobody who sees that painting today knows that. It's basically the same with song lyrics: many of them have a personal background, but anyone hearing the song later on the radio knows nothing about it. You don't have to interpret each and every Richter painting biographically. But it can be a legitimate approach, along with all of the other approaches favored by art theorists.

Where does Richter's oeuvre begin? There are, after all, paintings that were created before the first one in the catalogue, the Tisch (Table.)

Richter decides what belongs to his oeuvre when he gives it a work number. He has decided when that began, and what he will permit to be regarded as his work. For instance, the paintings he did in the GDR are not part of the oeuvre. There are also many paintings, two hundred

for certain, which were done in the west and are still not part of his official oeuvre. That was his artistic decision. By the way, Tisch is probably not the first painting, even though it is number one in the catalogue raisonné. Richter has stated that the works Mund (Mouth) and Nase (Nose) were done earlier. But thanks to the overpainting he did later, the Tisch seems naturally more experimental, more searching, more like a beginning.

Do you now understand the criteria for whether or not a painting is taken into the oeuvre?

No, not always. There is, for example, a completely abstract work, a wooden panel painted gray, and in the center, a piece of tape has obviously been pulled off, so that you can see the unpainted ground there. Above that, a hook is attached—odd, completely strange, even in the context of the works that come before and after it.

The remains of a riddle?

Yes. There are also paintings I've asked about, whether we shouldn't add them to the oeuvre. A portrait of the parents of the gallerist Heiner Freidrich is one of them. For a long time, the painting had no number, and now, not only does it have a number, but it also has a new title, which no longer refers to the fact that the painting is a portrait, but to the word "casino," which can be seen in the background.

What was the highest sum anyone's ever offered you to get one of those coveted numbers?

Unfortunately, nothing (laughs). So far, there haven't been any "bribery attempts." In that kind of a case, though, one has to remain steadfast, otherwise one's own scientific work will quickly no longer be considered serious. Where these kinds of attempts can lead some of my colleagues—well, we're reading about that right now in the reports about the so-called Jäger Collection.

Has there ever been a forgery problem?

Yes—in all media. Certain paintings keep popping up again and again. Obviously, there are actual workshops that specialize in Richter—in Düsseldorf, for instance, which is really astonishing, because it's so close to Cologne and it's so easy to check up on works here. I document these cases in the archive.

You began with the first works in 2003 and then afterward, did the research for all five of the volumes at the same time. How far along are you with the next volume?

Quite far. There's still some research to do, especially when it comes to the documentary photos and backs of the paintings. But all of the literature and provenances are done. I'm reckoning on 2013 for the next volume—the earlier, the better. It won't be volume two, though. I've postponed that one, because there is an unbelievable amount of material for the period covering the late 1960s, early 1970s: lots of gray paintings, lots of Vermalungen. These are not easy to research. The early, representational paintings are simpler. So the order of the series will be 1, 3, 4, 2, and then 5.

The last volume is supposed to appear in 2018. Does Gerhard Richter know that?

Yes, of course. At some point, a sixth volume will have to be added. Right now, at any rate, he is so productive that I'm almost afraid that the fifth volume will have to be split into two. After all, when it's published in 2018, it will encompass twenty years of creativity.