

July 5, 2002

Contact:

Sandra Farish Sloan, 415/357-4174, ssloan@sfmoma.org

Libby Garrison, 415/357-4177, lgarrison@sfmoma.org

Jessica O'Dwyer, 415/357-4176, jodwyer@sfmoma.org

**SFMOMA TO PRESENT GERHARD RICHTER: FORTY YEARS OF PAINTING
A Major Survey of the Artist's Work**

Opening October 12, 2002 and on view through January 14, 2003, at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (SFMOMA), *Gerhard Richter: Forty Years of Painting* presents a full-scale survey of paintings by the influential German artist Gerhard Richter. The exhibition will feature approximately 140 paintings from every phase of Richter's career, from 1962 to the present—with several major works from the SFMOMA permanent collection—demonstrating the artist's mastery of diverse genres including gestural abstraction, landscape, portraiture and photo-based painting. Richter's body of work calls into question many widely held attitudes about the inherent importance of stylistic consistency, the "organic" evolution

of individual artistic sensibility, the spontaneous nature of creativity and the relationships of technology and mass media imagery to traditional studio methods and formats. While many contemporary Postmodernists have explored these issues by circumventing or dismissing painting as a viable artistic option, Richter has challenged painting to meet the demands posed by new forms of conceptual art, in the process confirming the vitality of painting as a mode of expression. *Gerhard Richter: Forty Years of Painting* was organized by Robert Storr, senior curator in the department of painting and sculpture at The Museum of Modern Art, New York. SFMOMA Elise S. Haas Senior Curator of Painting and Sculpture Madeleine Grynsztejn will organize the San Francisco presentation.

Long a greatly respected figure in Europe, Richter is still relatively unfamiliar to the general American public. Two exhibitions of Richter's work have been shown in the United States: a 22-painting overview at the Wadsworth Atheneum



Gerhard Richter, *Lesende (Reader)*, 1994; Collection SFMOMA, purchased through the gifts of Mimi and Peter Haas and Helen and Charles Schwab, and the Accessions Committee Fund.

more

in Hartford, Connecticut, in 1987 and an 80-painting survey that opened at the Art Gallery of Ontario in Toronto in 1988 and then traveled to SFMOMA and several other U.S. museums. Over the years Richter's renown in the U.S. has grown, with his work featured in galleries, group or thematic shows at museums and exhibitions devoted to particular aspects of his work. SFMOMA has been acquiring Richter works for the Museum's permanent collection since 1990 and now has more than two dozen in its collection. Says Grynsztejn, "We are honored to present *Gerhard Richter: Forty Years of Painting* at SFMOMA. Bay Area art audiences have long been enthusiastic about the work of Gerhard Richter, and this exhibition offers a superb survey of this artist's oeuvre. We are also pleased to have the opportunity to showcase paintings from the Museum's collection as well as several major works from local private collections."

An enormously prolific artist, Richter has worked in all media. Painting, however, has always been his primary focus, and, with the exception of one of Richter's early drawings and sculptural portraits of the artist and his colleague Blinky Palermo, *Gerhard Richter: Forty Years of Painting* focuses exclusively on painting.

* * *

Born in 1932 in Dresden, Germany, Gerhard Richter grew up under the Third Reich and National Socialism. He left grammar school at the age of 15 and enrolled in a trade school, where he studied accounting, stenography and Russian. Around this time Richter also started to draw, and by the age of 16 he knew he wanted to be an artist. Richter's first arts-related job was as a member of a team that made banners for the communist government of the German Democratic Republic. His first application to the Art Academy in Dresden was turned down, but he was accepted to the school in 1952.

During his five-year stay at the Academy, Richter received traditional studio training under Heinz Lothmar, a minor Surrealist and dedicated communist who supervised the mural painting department at the Academy. This department was known for granting students the greatest freedom to experiment, as mural painting was overlooked as merely a decorative art form by the otherwise strict enforcers of the Socialist Realist aesthetic. Richter became an accomplished mural painter, and upon graduation executed several successful mural commissions. The steady income and success from these commissions enabled Richter to travel to the West beginning in the late 1950s.

In 1959, during his second trip west, Richter saw *Documenta 2*, one of a series of exhibitions designed to reintroduce Germany to international Modernism and the avant-garde art that had disappeared during the Nazi regime. This exhibition had a profound impact on Richter, exposing him to the work of artists Jackson Pollock and Lucio Fontana, whom he credits as helping open his eyes to Modernism. Seeing their work was what Storr calls "the turning point of Richter's artistic life." In 1961, shortly before the Berlin Wall was erected, Richter moved to West Germany and began a radically new phase of his career in the heady artistic milieu of 1960s Cologne and Düsseldorf. He enrolled in the Academy of Art in Düsseldorf in 1961 and there discovered Abstract Expressionism, Art Informel, Neo-Dada, Fluxus and a host of related avant-garde tendencies. Storr states: "Richter the virtuoso was a product of his own re-education as a painter once he arrived in the West rather than the strange reincarnation of an accomplished but conservative technician schooled in the East."

Richter's professor at the Academy was the Art Informel or gestural painter Karl Otto-Götz, whose influence can be seen in Richter's work throughout the artist's career. Joseph Beuys was appointed professor of monumental sculpture the same year Richter started at the Academy; while Richter initially avoided him, he appreciated his influence on art, and

more

they became colleagues in 1971 when Richter joined the Academy faculty.

Richter also formed ties with other artists of his generation, notably Sigmar Polke and Blinky Palermo. Richter, Polke and their friend Conrad Lueg identified themselves as German Pop artists and briefly upheld a satirical variant of Pop they called Capitalist Realism. Richter and his friends viewed the commercial culture of the West from a different perspective than their American and British counterparts as a result of the economic and political situation in Germany in the immediate postwar era.

Beginning in 1962 with gray-scale paintings that melded newspaper iconography and family snapshots with an austere photo-based realism unlike anything done by the American Photo-realists, Richter set his own course through the tangle of “isms” that thrived around him. Although Richter’s subject matter, such as the amenities of modern living (*Klorolle [Toilet Paper]*, 1965), superficially resembled that of Pop artists like Andy Warhol or Roy Lichtenstein, the selection of other images, such as aerial bombardment (*Mustang-Staffel [Mustang Squadron]*, 1964) or a smiling Nazi soldier (*Onkel Rudi [Uncle Rudi]*, 1965), hinted at a more brooding and historically informed sense of contemporary reality. Formally, Richter eschewed the graphic, often cartoonish quality of New York Pop for a painterly treatment of his snapshot and magazine-clipping sources that resembles Photo-realism but with opposite effects. Systematically reducing the information transcribed from the source image to an elusive, usually ashen blur, Richter heightened the viewer’s sense of the unnaturalness of both the original photographs and their painted renditions.

In the early 1970s Richter went on to paint spare monochromes that evoked mainstream Minimalism but with a slightly different intent and feeling. In the late 1970s and early 1980s Richter’s brightly colored and boldly delineated canvases suggested but also diverged from the pyrotechnic Neo-Expressionist painting then in full flush. These gestural abstractions continued his methodical yet magisterial deconstruction and reconstruction of the language of painting. Meanwhile, throughout his career, Richter has cultivated a subtly romantic and seemingly antimodernist manner in the landscapes and hauntingly beautiful “old master-like” portraits he has intermittently produced, even as he has pushed abstraction to new levels of visual intensity.

In 1988 Richter completed a cycle of 15 startling black-and-white paintings titled *October 18, 1977* based on press photographs of the Baader-Meinhof group—a band of German radicals turned terrorists who died in a Stuttgart prison on that date in tragic and highly controversial circumstances. This group of paintings marks a turning point in Richter’s career, which had previously been interpreted as detached and ironic. The most recent works in this exhibition, created between 1990 and the present (including the *Moritz* series, 2000–2001, which has not been widely seen in America), reveal a gentle, occasionally elegiac sensibility despite the abiding critical severity of Richter’s painterly identity. *Lesende (Reader)*, 1994, (collection SFMOMA), for example, is a stunning portrait of Richter’s wife, Sabine Moritz, painted with the crystalline clarity of a Vermeer.

In every aspect of his varied output, Richter has assumed a skeptical distance from vanguardists and conservatives alike regarding what painting should be, choosing instead to test the limits of what he as an artist can create out of the formal conventions and contradictory ideological legacy of the medium. The result, paradoxically, has been a thorough dismantling of those conventions and at the same time one of the most convincing demonstrations of painting’s renewed vitality to be found in late 20th- and early 21st-century art.

SFMOMA’s Education Department will present a variety of programs and public lectures to further enhance visitors’

more

experience of the exhibition. Robert Storr will present *Richter's Wager*, a lecture in SFMOMA's Phyllis Wattis Theater on Saturday, October 12 at 3 p.m. An interactive multimedia program and an audio tour with commentary by Storr and SFMOMA Director Neal Benezra will also be available in the galleries. Additional program information is available on the Museum's Web site at www.sfmoma.org.

After its presentation at SFMOMA, *Gerhard Richter: Forty Years of Painting* will travel to the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington, DC, where it will be on view from February 20 to May 18, 2003.

The exhibition is accompanied by a comprehensive illustrated catalogue featuring an extensive critical essay by the curator, an interview with the artist, a chronology, an exhibition history and a bibliography. *Gerhard Richter: Forty Years of Painting* contains over 200 color and duotone reproductions and numerous gatefolds in its 336 pages; the book is published by the Museum of Modern Art, New York, and distributed by D.A.P./Distributed Art Publishers. It is available at the SFMOMA MuseumStore or online at www.sfmoma.org (\$69 hardcover, \$39 softcover).

Gerhard Richter: Forty Years of Painting was organized by The Museum of Modern Art, New York and made possible by Jo Carole and Ronald S. Lauder with generous support from Mimi and Peter Haas. An indemnity has been granted by the Federal Council on the Arts and the Humanities. Additional funding is provided by Leila and Melville Straus and The Contemporary Arts Council and The Junior Associates of the Museum of Modern Art.

Support for the SFMOMA presentation has been generously provided by Wells Fargo, Helen and Charles Schwab, Martha and Bruce Atwater, Doris and Donald Fisher, Mimi and Peter Haas, Pat and Bill Wilson and Doug and Jane Wolf.
Hotel Sponsor: Hotel Palomar

Media sponsor: Classical 102.1 KDFC

* * *

Hours: Open daily (except Wednesdays) 11 a.m. to 6 p.m.; open late Thursdays until 9 p.m.; summer hours (Memorial Day to Labor Day) 10 a.m. to 6 p.m.; closed Wednesdays and the following public holidays: Thanksgiving, Christmas, New Year's Day.

Admission prices: Adults \$10; seniors \$7; students \$6. SFMOMA members and children twelve and under are admitted free. The first Tuesday of each month admission is free. Thursday evenings, 6 to 9 p.m., admission is half price.

SFMOMA is easily accessible by MUNI, BART, Golden Gate Transit, SamTrans and Caltrain. Hourly, daily and monthly parking is available at the SFMOMA Garage at 147 Minna Street. For parking information, call 415/348-0971.

Visit our Web site at www.sfmoma.org or call 415/357-4000 for more information.

The San Francisco Museum of Modern Art is a private, not-for-profit institution supported by its members, individual contributors to Donor Circle, corporate and foundation support, federal and state government grants and admission revenues. Annual programming is sustained through the generosity of Grants for the Arts/San Francisco Hotel Tax Fund and The James Irvine Foundation. Thursday evening half-priced admission is sponsored by Banana Republic. Online sponsor: Bay Area Citysearch.com. Reduced admission for seniors is sponsored by Pacific Bell. KidstART free admission for children twelve and under is made possible by The Charles Schwab Corporation Foundation.

#

