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Gerhard Richter: Drawings

More than two decades have gone by since the retrospective of Gerhard Richter's drawings at the Kunstmuseum Winterthur (and subsequently in Dresden, Tilburg and Krefeld). The first catalogue raisonné, covering the period 1962–1999, was published at that time. The production of such a book was by no means a matter of course for a painter whose relationship to drawing was rather reserved; furthermore, he had repeatedly voiced his scepticism about this genre. In view of its improvised type of formulation, drawing was the exact opposite of his painting. In contrast to the official status of a painting that Richter favoured, whereby the different stages of the work process reach a conclusion, a drawing was something which evaded being developed in an orderly manner.



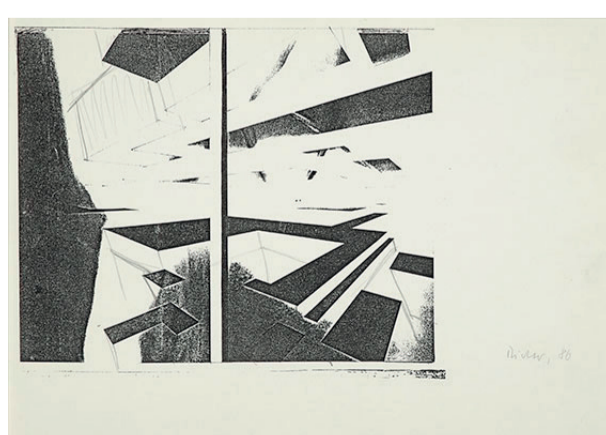
From 1999 on he frequently created works on paper, but rarely showed them in his numerous exhibitions. This all changed when Richter decided in 2017 to give up painting altogether, for then he began to draw and paint on paper with renewed enthusiasm. He now spends time in his studio as of old, keeping to his usual daily rhythm, but instead of working on a wall he sits at his desk. His approach is no different to before: his work has never proceeded uninterrupted, but has always been restricted to periodic bouts of activity. After painting intensively for weeks, Richter usually took a lengthy break and got on with something else. As the dates of the drawings confirm, they were also done within a few days or weeks, depending on the artist's mood and concentration. Richter soon went beyond the confines of drawing in pencil to using oil pastels and inks as further stimuli for his work. He has exhibited these new drawings in different contexts and published them in artist books, in line with his continued fascination with the potential of reproduction.



Once the number of drawings had grown to a considerable extent, it made sense to reactivate the compilation of the catalogue raisonné and work on extending it; Richter encouraged me to take on this task and authorized me to assume responsibility. This endeavour is going to take some time, as it is not only a matter of new works, but also of registering drawings from previous years that have been overlooked. In some cases, an assessment also needs to be made of the nature of the works in question: are they casual sketches or drawings to be taken seriously?



The catalogue for the recent exhibition of drawings at Galerie Sies + Höke in Düsseldorf, timed to celebrate Richter's 90th birthday, is effectively the prelude to this future work. The show presented drawings from the years 1963–2020, including some that I had not come across previously and known works on paper that were considered lost. While addressing the drawings for the catalogue, it became apparent that some of them offer insight into the development of Richter's paintings. There is a sheet from 1963 which demonstrates an innovative method that Richter had adopted at that time and described in a letter to friends in Dresden: using solvent he reworked and smudged illustrations he had cut from magazines. Using this technique, Richter brought the effects of gestural painting that had before been the essence of his practice to bear on these photos. An image treated in this manner became the model for the painting "Tisch" (Table) registered as painting No. 1 in Richter's catalogue raisonné. The 21 studies for the painting "SDI" dating from 1986 were another surprise. These are the only studies for an abstract painting to have survived; they demonstrate the way Richter created fictive pictorial spaces with illusionistic means, and how he played and experimented with different versions. In the end, he painted a "solution" arrived at in this way onto two large-scale canvases with the help of a projector and then worked over them with a squeegee until only vestiges of the original image could be seen underneath the multiple layers of paint. Thus, Richter was able to realize what he himself has said about his painting, namely that his "initial intention is always to achieve a complete picture with a correct and composed motif" but then he "goes to rather a lot of trouble to undermine this objective bit by bit".



The further progress of his work on paper is exemplified by a series of 21 coloured sheets that are on show at the Fondation Beyeler at the moment. These are quite definitely his last works, Richter assured me. Whether this is true remains to be seen. My commentary in this respect will appear on the museum's website in the near future.

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