

Gerhard Richter

Abstraction

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Edited by

Ortrud Westheider and Michael Philipp

Exhibition

Dietmar Elger

Ortrud Westheider

with Valerie Hortolani

With contributions by

Janice Bretz

Hubertus Butin

Dietmar Elger

Valerie Hortolani

Matthias Krüger

Kerstin Küster

Ortrud Westheider

Armin Zweite

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Across Art History: Gerhard Richter and Abstraction

Ortrud Westheider

Gerhard Richter paints abstract pictures. To this day. In the 1970s he began a series known as the Abstract paintings, and he has been working on it ever since. Yet his exploration of abstract art is not limited to this series alone, and nor did it begin with it. Instead, the relationship between abstraction and realism has left its mark on Richter's entire oeuvre. His work deals with abstraction as a method of painting, and is therefore deeply rooted in art history. Richter reflects upon the liberating ideas of modernism and contrasts them critically with the idealism of a "universal language" of abstraction. This universalism influenced the understanding of art in West Germany when Richter left the German Democratic Republic for the Federal Republic of Germany in 1961. There, new art had begun to respond to a Germany ideologically divided between socialist realism and informalism by "departing from the picture"¹ and turning its back on painting. Richter, too, played with these ideas and cofounded a group of artists who called their movement "capitalist realism" and tested new forms of expression through their actions.²

Painting Systems

Number one in his catalogue raisonné, however, is a painting titled *Table* [1] (1962, fig. 1). A year after he left the GDR, the painter confronted a depiction of an everyday object with a nonrepresentational swirl of color. The shift from one system to another was carried out in a two-stage process. First, he created a realistic image of an object found in every household. The table is a place of togetherness, from family meals to banquets. People talk, study, write, compose poetry, and also do practical work at tables. In its universality, the object Richter chose is in no way secondary to the painterly gesture he added to it. In the West it was considered an ideologeme for artistic freedom.

In West Germany from the late 1950s onward, abstract art had established a sense of exclusivity through European informalism and American abstract expressionism, which made it difficult or even impossible to connect to the work of the older generation of new objectivity painters before the Nazi era.³ Mass murder, persecution, and the questioning of individualism had shaken the foundations of humanism that had nurtured modernist abstract art and its idealistic model of antimaterialism. Existentialism was a philosophy much admired by artists, and it centered on the individual.

In this context, after the end of World War II, the most important reinterpretation of abstraction in art history took place in Western Europe and America: Vasily Kandinsky's idealistic pursuit of the grand gesture became the spontaneous self-expression of the individual artist. Jackson Pollock's action paintings (fig. p. 61), for example, demonstrated pure subjectivity, and once again the painterly gesture embodied the presence of the painter/creator. After the failure of the great ideologies, artists overwhelmed viewers with nonhierarchically organized large-scale works and challenged them to form their own opinions. Whereas East German artists sought suitable visual motifs and artistic methods to explore the theme of social progress as a collective experience within the socialist order of the GDR, individualism in the West was literalized and identified with abstraction.⁴ Karl Otto Götz, Richter's teacher at the Düsseldorf Art Academy, represented this generation of artists (fig. 2). Richter had seen and photographed Götz's work, as well as paintings by Pollock and other American abstract artists at the II. documenta in Kassel in 1959. Back in Dresden, he tried out the informalist style for himself.⁵

Yet Richter's kind of abstract art should not be equated with an uncritical affirmation of the Western ideologeme. In the GDR he had become familiar with the aims of socialist realism through his studies at the Dresden Academy of Fine Arts, and through the formalism debate⁶ he had been exposed to the defamation of abstract art as a decadent expression of the capitalist bourgeoisie. After leaving the GDR, though, he encountered the emphasis on abstraction in West Germany, as well as the protests of a younger generation of artists who were critical of this fixation.

In Düsseldorf, Richter attended the fluxus actions by Joseph Beuys and Nam June Paik. They gave art a new twist, added new methods of expression and media, and expanded the concept of art. Richter, however, sought opportunities beyond the polarity of figurative and abstract art. Looking back, he observed: "I was looking for a third way in which Eastern realism and Western modernism would be resolved into one redeeming construct."⁷ In this context, the painting *Table* [1] should not be regarded as a way of replacing the realist system with abstraction. The object is not painted over with a painterly gesture intended to obliterate it and depart from the path of realism in favor of abstraction. Richter's third way initially opened up in the Photo paintings. Realistically capturing/citing a found, mass-produced object gave him neutrality. This was how he was able to grasp realism (in the sense of



1 Gerhard Richter: *Table [1]*, 1962
Oil on canvas, 90 × 113 cm
Harvard Art Museums/
Busch-Reisinger Museum, Cambridge, MA,
on loan from a private collection



2 Karl Otto Götz: *Mymel*, 1960
Mixed technique on canvas, 100 × 120 cm
Saarlandmuseum Saarbrücken

the German pop art he propagated)⁸ while at the same time separating abstraction from its ideological function in the conflict between East and West Germany. For Richter, however, the most important thing about this third way was that his Photo paintings made it possible for him to carry on painting.⁹

From the early 1960s onward, Richter went through a variety of very diverse phases. In the 1980s, critics were still reacting with skepticism to new stages of his oeuvre, accusing him of randomness.¹⁰ This essay investigates how Richter—in clinging to painting and continuing the search for a third way between realism and nonobjectivity—continually worked to convey the realism of the illusory, while citing and updating modernism.¹¹ This text is divided into two parts. In the first, two contemporary depictions of the history of abstract art form a context for Richter's artistic references. The second analyzes Richter's citations of avant-garde artists such as Marcel Duchamp, Alexander Rodchenko, and Piet Mondrian, interpreting the development of his style as an act of critical commentary.

Abstraction: The Sources

In the 1960s, several art historians began writing about the antecedents of abstract art. They did not primarily consider modernism a break with the traditions of realist art. Rather, they traced the abstract tendencies of art all the way back to antiquity. Richter's works stem from his examination of these sources.

Heinrich Lützeler's book *Abstrakte Malerei* is marked by the immediate postwar situation in which he—a professor of art history and dean of the faculty at the University of Bonn—committed himself to the recovery of academic life after the end of the Nazi era. Even though it was not published until 1961, his book reflects the situation of abstract and nonobjective art during its process of rehabilitation after having been outlawed under the Nazis. Lützeler described abstract art as a European phenomenon that found resonance in America. He identified Japan and Japanese calligraphy as the most important sources of inspiration.¹² Lützeler began his history of the development of abstract art with Paul Cézanne. In his explanation of the concept, though, he equated abstract art with nonrepresentational art. This was not a self-evident assertion, since the first definition of abstraction is simply *abs-trahere*, drawing or moving away from the object. Lützeler was however writing from a background influenced by Christianity and Paul Klee's notion of an "expanded creation,"¹³ and so he targeted the nonobjective, suggesting the term "concrete art" for it.¹⁴ At the same time he elucidated numerous "abstract features" in representational art from the early Christian era onward¹⁵ and presented a first collection of influential philosophical source texts, beginning with Plato's allegory of the cave.

On his search for a path between realism and nonrepresentational art, Gerhard Richter addressed himself to some of the central references in artistic discourse since antiquity. The curtain motif comprises a first group of works in Richter's oeuvre that is not based on photographs (cat. 1, 2).¹⁶ In these paintings the artist adhered to photographic, documentary-style black, white, and gray.¹⁷ The motif itself can be traced back to Pliny the Elder, who, in his *Naturalis historia* (circa 77 CE), reports the argument between the painters Zeuxis and Parrhasius about the authenticity of art. According to Pliny, Parrhasius had painted a curtain in such a deceptively realistic way that his opponent allegedly demanded that the curtain be pushed aside, so that he could study the painting.¹⁸ Richter's painting is a detail of a curtain. He cites the motif showing the bottom hem of the curtain. His concern is not to replicate the illusion that Pliny had discussed; instead, it seems as if he is folding the canvas. As the body of the painting itself began to be treated as an object in the 1950s, this was a practice that could be found in the works of Düsseldorf's ZERO artists, such as Günther Uecker and Herbert Zangs. Still, Richter's study of the curtain motif and his reference to painting's ubiquitous tradition of playing with cloth folds remain firmly within the medium of painting.¹⁹

In 1964, Otto Stelzer published his book *Die Vorgeschichte der abstrakten Kunst*. Unlike Lützeler, Stelzer traced the sources of abstraction against the backdrop of informalist art.²⁰ Stelzer had been a professor at the Hamburg University of Fine Arts since 1955. He was interested in the role of chance and in liberating the painting from signature brushwork. Stelzer's agenda excluded geometrical abstraction. He also equated abstraction with nonobjective art. Stelzer's book was influential because it did not regard the history of modern art as a break with tradition, but traced abstract strategies in painting and literature back to the eighteenth century. Even though Richter did not read the book, he would have encountered Stelzer's ideas, because they were generally discussed among artists and at art schools.

Structures and Illusions: Abstract Works in the 1960s

Valerie Hortolani



cat. 4

At a time when painting was losing significance, Gerhard Richter's work was a defense of the medium. To avoid the burden of imputed meaning, he turned to photographs in the 1960s. Austere compositions and grids offered neutral motifs, shifting the focus to structures and illusions. By copying and alienating details, he liberated painting from its role of representation. The form of abstraction thus generated was new. Instead of abstracting from the object as Vasily Kandinsky did, Richter centered on pictorial resources such as streaks, gestural brushwork, and shadows.

1 *Curtain (Vorhang)* [58-1], 1964

Oil on canvas, 65 × 47 cm

Block Collection, Berlin



2 *Curtain III (Light) (Vorhang III [hell])* [56], 1965

Oil on canvas, 199.5 × 189.5 cm

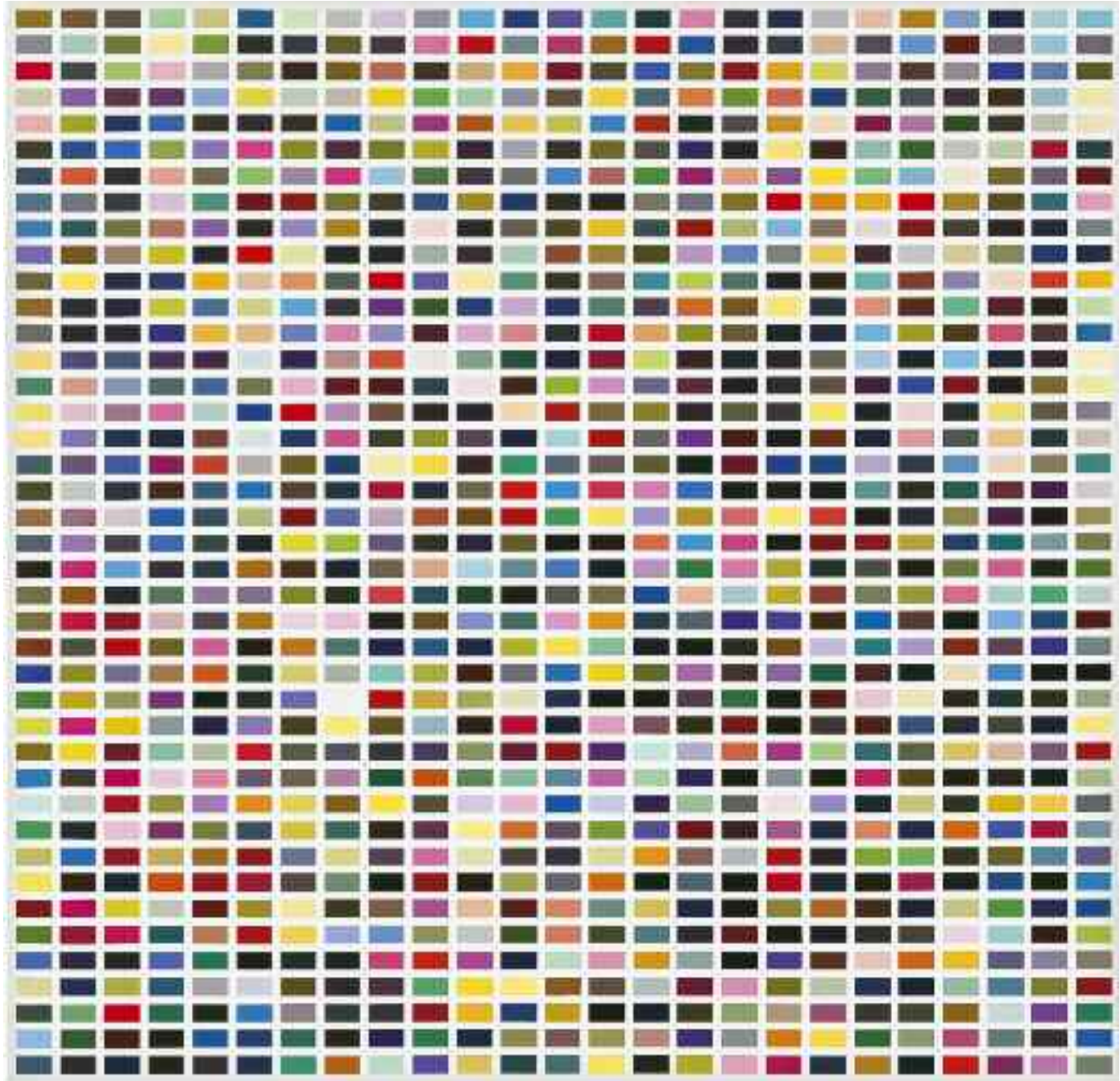
Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Nationalgalerie



17 *1025 Colors (1025 Farben)* [357-3], 1974

Lacquer on canvas, 120 × 123.5 cm

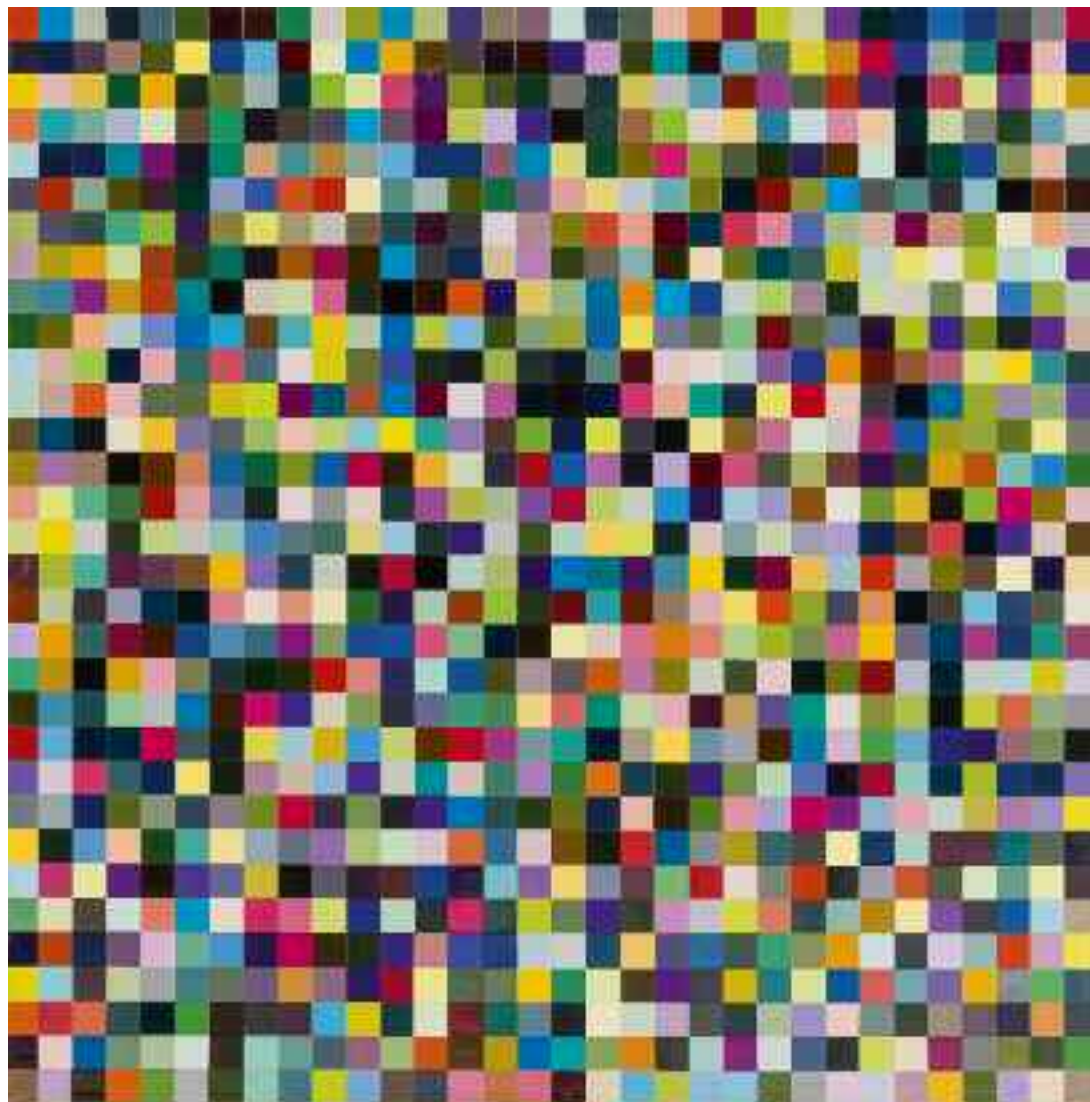
Private collection, Cologne



18 *1024 Colors (1024 Farben)* [356-2], 1974

Lacquer on canvas, 96 × 96 cm

Collezione Prada, Milan



22 *Inpainting (Vermalung)* [326-7], 1972

Oil on canvas, 70 × 55 cm

The "M" Art Foundation, Belgium



23 *Red-Blue-Yellow (Rot-Blau-Gelb)* [339-4], 1972

Oil on canvas, 98 × 92 cm

Private collection, Switzerland



48 *Gray Forest (Grauwald)* (10.1.08), 2008
Lacquer on photograph, 18.6 × 12.6 cm
Private collection



49 *Gray Forest (Grauwald)* (11.1.08), 2008
Lacquer on photograph, 18.6 × 12.6 cm
Private collection



50 *Gray Forest (Grauwald)* (12.1.08), 2008
Lacquer on photograph, 18.6 × 12.6 cm
Private collection



51 *Gray Forest (Grauwald)* (22.1.08), 2008
Lacquer on photograph, 18.6 × 12.6 cm
Private collection



63 *A B, Quiet (A B, Still)* [612-4], 1986

Oil on canvas, 225 × 200 cm

Museum Barberini, Potsdam



78 *Strip* [930-4], 2013/2016

Digital print on paper between aluminum Dibond and plexiglass,
200 × 1,000 cm (four panels at 200 × 250 cm each)

Private collection





82 *Abstract Painting (Abstraktes Bild)* [946-3], 2016
Oil on canvas, 175 × 250 cm
Private collection









Biography of Gerhard Richter

Previous pages:

Timm Rautert: *Gerhard Richter, Düsseldorf 1986*

The artist working on his paintings *Victoria I* [601] and *Victoria II* [602]

Courtesy of Parrotta Contemporary Art, Cologne

- 1932** Gerhard Richter is born in Dresden on February 9.
He grows up in Reichenau (now Bogatynia, Poland) and Waltersdorf in Upper Lusatia, Saxony.
- 1939** His father Horst Richter is called up to the German army. After serving for years on both the Eastern and Western fronts, he is taken prisoner and later released in August 1945.
- 1944–45** Richter produces his first works of art, writes poetry, and takes photographs.
- 1946** For financial reasons, Richter has to leave his high school in Zittau, which would have prepared him for an advanced school certificate. He briefly attends a combined elementary/intermediate school in Waltersdorf and then a trade school in Zittau from September.
- 1948–49** He completes his schooling in Zittau with a basic high school certificate.
Richter paints signs for an advertising office in Zittau.
- 1950** Begins training as a set painter at Zittau's municipal theater.
Richter applies to the Dresden Academy of Fine Arts for admission to the winter semester of 1950–51 but is rejected.
Employed as a painter by DEWAG Werbung, a state-owned advertising company in Zittau.
- 1951** Richter applies to Dresden Academy of Fine Arts for the second time and is accepted. He begins his studies in the winter semester (fig. 1).
At the Academy he meets his first wife, Marianne (Ema) Eufinger, who is studying fashion.
- 1953** After completing the foundation course, Richter switches to the mural class taught by Professor Heinz Lohmar in the winter semester of 1953–54.
- 1955** Begins the two-semester diploma course.
Richter visits West Germany (Hamburg and Munich) for the first time and also travels to Paris.
- 1956** As his graduation piece he paints the mural *Joy of Life* at the German Hygiene Museum in Dresden. This has now been painted over.
- 1957** Richter begins a three-year postgraduate course, which comes with a studio at the Academy and a monthly stipend.
He receives various state commissions and takes part in his first exhibitions. Alongside this he produces independent works, such as the monotype series *Elbe* (cat. 47).
Marries Marianne (Ema) Eufinger in Lower Saxony (West Germany), where his in-laws live.
- 1958** Richter paints a mural for the Dresden district headquarters of the Socialist Unity Party (SED). The theme is the struggle of the working class.
Visits the World's Fair in Brussels.
- 1959** While visiting his in-laws on holiday, Richter travels to Kassel to see II. documenta. He is struck by the work of Jackson Pollock (fig. p. 61), Lucio Fontana, and Giorgio Morandi (fig. p. 15), and he produces his first informalist works, which he later destroys.
- 1961** Research trip to Moscow and Leningrad.
In late March, Richter leaves Dresden and moves to West Germany with his wife Ema. They make their home in Düsseldorf, where Richter is admitted to the class taught by Professor Ferdinand Macketanz at the Düsseldorf Art Academy.
- 1962** In Düsseldorf Richter meets the artists Manfred Kuttner, Konrad Lueg (who later became successful as a gallerist under his real surname, Fischer), and Sigmar Polke.
In the summer semester he transfers to the class taught by Karl Otto Götz (figs. pp. 10, 62).
Richter paints his first works based on photographs found in illustrated magazines. *Table* (figs. pp. 10, 24), later becomes the first piece in his personal catalogue raisonné.
In June he attends the "NEO-DADA in Music" concert performed by Nam June Paik at the Kammer-spiele in Düsseldorf.
Galerie Junge Kunst in Fulda hosts Richter's first show of works produced in the West in a joint exhibition with Kuttner.
He visits the Venice Biennale.
- 1963** In February Richter visits the "Festum Fluxorum Fluxus" organized by Joseph Beuys at the Düsseldorf Art Academy.
He meets Blinky Palermo at the Art Academy.
His first self-staged exhibition, together with Kuttner, Lueg, and Polke, in an empty shop on Kaiserstraße 31A in Düsseldorf, where they coin the term "capitalist realism."
In summer Richter and Lueg travel to Paris and present themselves as German pop artists to leading gallery managers Ileana Sonnabend and Iris Clert.