

KINO LORBER

presents



GERHARD RICHTER PAINTING

A film by Corinna Belz

HD / 1.78:1 / Dolby Digital / 97 minutes
In German and English, with English subtitles

Official Selection, Toronto International Film Festival

Special Screening, Art Basel Miami Beach

A Kino Lorber Release
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ABOUT THE FILM

One of the world's greatest living painters, the German artist Gerhard Richter has spent over half a century experimenting with a tremendous range of techniques and ideas, addressing historical crises and mass media representation alongside explorations of chance procedures. Infamously media-shy, he agreed to appear on camera for the first time in 15 years for a 2007 short by filmmaker Corinna Belz called *Gerhard Richter's Window*.

Her follow-up, *Gerhard Richter Painting*, is exactly that: a thrilling document of Richter's creative process, juxtaposed with intimate conversations (with his critics, his collaborators, and his American gallerist Marian Goodman) and rare archive material. From our fly-on-the-wall perspective, we watch the 79-year-old create a series of large-scale abstract canvasses, using fat brushes and a massive squeegee to apply (and then scrape off) layer after layer of brightly colored paint. This mesmerizing footage, of a highly charged process of creation and destruction, turns Belz's portrait of an artist into a work of art itself.

CREDITS

A Zero One Film Production
In Co-Production with Terz Film / WDR / MDR
In Cooperation with ARTE

Sound Design
Dominik Schleier

Re-Recording Mixer
Martin Steyer

Editor
Stephan Krumbiegel

Director of Photography
Johann Feindt (BVK)
Frank Kranstedt Dieter Stürmer Andy Schocken

Line Producer
Tassilo Aschauer

Produced by
Thomas Kufus

Written and directed by
Corinna Belz

ABOUT THE FILMMAKER

Corinna Belz studied philosophy, art history, and media sciences in Cologne, Zurich, and at the Freie Universität Berlin. As a documentary filmmaker, her credits include the features *Life After Microsoft* (2001) and *Three Wishes, Three Women, One Year* (2005, co-directed with Bärbel Maiwurm), as well as a segment of *24 Hours Berlin* (2009). Her first film about Richter, a 2007 short called *Gerhard Richter's Window*, documented the creation of his pixelated stained glass window in the Cologne Cathedral.

FILMMAKER'S STATEMENT

The idea for the film developed during my previous work documenting the creation of Richter's stained glass window for the Cologne Cathedral. It was the first time he had participated in a film project in 15 years; when it comes to expressing himself in words, he prefers written ones.

It became clear to me that a film about a painter must focus on painting. It was the actual work in the artist's studio that interested me most: the authentic and immediate process of putting paint to canvas, and the instruments, gestures, and movements involved, emotionally as well as physically.

"Painting is a secretive business," he told us at the start of filming. Except when creating very large pictures, he always works alone — which made me question if he would be able to cope with a small film team in his inner work sanctum for weeks and months on end. My task was to establish a mental and emotional space that would allow us to co-exist in the uncluttered studio, each pursuing his work unhindered: Richter painting and our team filming.

The main shooting period between April and September 2009 was an exceptional stroke of luck, as well as a process punctuated by the occasional crisis. A fundamental skepticism of the status quo is both inherent to Richter's worldview and a key element of his painting technique: the giant squeegee he uses to apply and scrape off each monochromatic layer of paint becomes an instrument of assertion as well as doubt in his hands. And as we watched the painter at work, we too became caught up in the tension and dynamics of the process, as we saw pictures emerge and then often disappear. Like the paintings themselves, we had to withstand the artist's skepticism.

Corinna Belz, June 2011

INTERVIEW WITH CORINNA BELZ

Did Richter have any personal objective in making the film?

I think it was more about finding out whether a film could work at all; about asking: “Can I work with a camera behind me?” Maybe he didn’t give it much thought at all. It didn’t become clear until much later that the film is also a record of the genesis of a series of paintings, later shown at the Marian Goodman Gallery in New York. It’s difficult to recall every stage in the making of his paintings, because they are so extremely complex.

Was it clear from the outset that you would film him during the production of those paintings?

I started shooting outside the studio: a site visit at Museum Ludwig before his exhibition in 2008, and then the opening. But it was clear from the start that the film should focus on the production of a series of paintings. I wanted to film how he paints, but I was not at all certain it would be possible. His assistants occasionally discussed it with him, but I didn’t know when he was going to start a major new series. In the end, I waited one and a half years. In March 2009, I met him by chance at a private viewing and he said: “I’m starting a painting tomorrow, you can come along.”

Did you have to try to be “invisible” in the studio?

There’s no way to be invisible in that studio. There’s nothing in it. If there was any doubt about his willingness to have us there, we wouldn’t have felt like we belonged. He was well aware of our presence. That comes out in the film when he says, “When I know I’m being filmed, I walk differently; something changes.” He didn’t pretend we weren’t there and neither did we.

Did you make specific arrangements about the details of your shoot in advance?

We planned from one day to the next, shooting for two to four hours at a time. I said from the beginning that I wanted to keep the crew to a minimum. The very first time we shot in the studio, there were only two of us. During the second period of filming, Richter turned me me spontaneously, and a conversation began. There was a fine balance between watching and talking.

When did you come up with the idea to install a camera in the studio?

I had the idea straight away. For a while, we even thought about trying to make do with just that camera in order to avoid distracting him. We considering installing a camera he could adjust to suit himself, but he usually works on several paintings simultaneously. So how do you maintain continuity? The canvases change so quickly, sometimes beyond recognition within a morning. We had to be really careful to ensure that every close-up of a specific stage of work had a corresponding long shot.

I also realized that the fixed camera on its tripod didn't really do justice to the physical dimension of how he works. You could see how the paintings changed, but you couldn't see Richter contemplating them. That's why we decided to use a hand-held camera after all, starting with the yellow paintings. That worked really well — it became indispensable to me. There's physicality to these pictures, because he really works the paint on the canvas; the layers and movement of color are so beautiful. And Richter himself has a strong physical presence when he's painting. The way he works with the squeegee, the elegant sweeping motion, his assessment of the paintings — we could capture all that better with the hand-held camera.

Watching your film, the paintings seem to become protagonists in their own right. Was that intended?

I wasn't aware of that at first. But as soon as I stood in the studio, I started relating to the paintings. There you are, with this heightened sense of awareness: what's going on now, what's happening on the canvas, how is the relationship between the artist and the painting developing, what will he do next? Sometimes I looked at a painting and thought: "It's good like this." But then came the next step in the process, and what I had perceived as a finished picture would be destroyed before my very eyes, just painted over.

You mentioned the scene where Richter interrupts his work and challenges the very idea of the film. How did you cope with that?

Things came to a head one day when he was working while being filmed. That's when he stopped the scene. We discussed the situation. That's how we coped. He told me when something bothered him. He is able to overcome a lack of enthusiasm once he's set his mind on something. His skepticism is part of the overall dynamic of the situation: by articulating doubt he is upholding the continuity of the collaboration. He has an exceptional capacity to persist with something and question it at the same time.

Did you ever feel at risk of losing the necessary distance to your subject, due to the long shooting period and the intimacy of the studio situation?

I don't think I ever lost the necessary distance. I never knew when and how things would progress. The only way I could find out when the paintings were finished was to keep going back to the studio. So I was always in a state of inquisitive suspense that kept me from getting too comfortable.

Did you ever consider doing conventional interviews as well?

Initially, I told Richter that he wouldn't need to talk at all. I knew he rarely does interviews, and he didn't even know me. Then I thought of including people he knows, like Benjamin H. D. Buchloh. I asked questions as they arose out of a situation. Richter never soliloquizes; that's not him. He and

his assistants are always provoking active engagement. They're not giving a speech, they're speaking to someone. That's why I left my own voice in the film, asking questions.

Your focus does not seem to be on exploring theoretical positions in modern art.

My interest was to show Richter at work. How he moves, how he applies paint to canvas, his compelling squeegee technique. The purpose of the film was not to reflect the art historical discourse. It's not that I didn't have such concerns in mind, but I didn't want to use the film to interpret the paintings. Books are a better medium for articulating theoretical positions. And the actual act of painting is hard to describe in words — especially the way Richter mixes primary colors on the canvas, generating such a complex system. The way layers are built up and submerged, and how sculptural they appear on canvas. The most important thing for me in this film was to show something uniquely visual.

To what approach did that aspect influence the editing?

Initially, we assembled long sequences of the genesis of two paintings. We had 80 minutes of the yellow paintings in the rough cut alone, which of course had to be condensed. The most important thing was for the viewer to be able to follow the development of the paintings, to shift focus from the painter to the paintings. You have to allow time for that. We also included archive material from a 1960s interview, which shows that Richter has always taken a very considered approach to speaking about his art.

How did Richter react to the finished film? Had he seen rough cuts?

We had agreed that he would vet the film before its release — that goes without saying. You are really asking a lot of someone when you feature them in a documentary. But he wasn't in on the editing process. He first saw the film shortly before its completion. He viewed it with great interest and did not suggest any changes.

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Gerhard Richter was born in 1932 in Dresden, where he grew up under National Socialism and then lived under East German Communism. He attended the Dresden Art Academy from 1951 to 1956, and then worked for a few years as a mural painter before his focus shifted to the Abstract Expressionist and Informel (“art without form”) work he saw on occasional trips to West Germany. In 1961, a few months prior to the construction of the Berlin Wall, he managed to flee to Düsseldorf, where he began new studies with Informel painter Karl Otto Götz.

During the early sixties, Richter met and began to work with artists such as Sigmar Polke, Konrad Fischer-Lueg, and Georg Baselitz. Together with Polke and Fischer-Lueg, Richter formed a group called the Capitalist Realists. At their very first exhibition in 1963, he presented his gray “photo-paintings,” which still remain some of his most groundbreaking (and well-known) work. Fascinated by the rivalry between traditionalist painting techniques and mass media imagery — as well as the ability of each medium to represent and interpret reality — he would project found photographs onto canvas, tracing the images and then blurring the paint with a soft brush or squeegee. He also started to create colorful figurative works at this time, producing entire series of city views, clouds, and mountains.

In the mid-sixties, Richter began to paint his Color Charts and Grey Paintings, both experiments with chance and technique; in 1972, he represented Germany at the Venice Biennale with a series called 48 Portraits, images of intellectuals that he selected from an encyclopedia. As varied as these projects were, it wasn’t until 1976 that he first gave the title “Abstract Painting” to one of his works; in the hundreds of abstract works that followed over the next 30 years, he has used various techniques and tools to build up cumulative layers of color, eschewing composition in favor of a decisive element of chance. (He once described his process by saying: “When I paint an abstract, I do not know what it is going to look like beforehand, nor do I know where I want to go when I’m painting.”)

At the same time, Richter has always continued working on figurative paintings, including photo-realist portraits of his family members, his 1982 (now iconic) Candles series, and 1988’s “October 18, 1977,” based on press photographs of the Baader-Meinhof group. He has lived and worked in Cologne since 1983, and was made an honorary citizen of the city in 2007, the same year he created a new stained glass window (consisting of 11,500 pixel-like squares) for the famed Cologne Cathedral.

In his forward to the catalog of a 2002 retrospective of Richter’s work at New York’s Museum of Modern Art, Glenn D. Lowry, the director of the museum, wrote: “No artist of the postwar era...has placed more intriguing and rigorous demands upon specialists, interpreters, followers, and average viewers alike — nor upon himself. In Richter’s work...there is a demonstration of the way in which painting’s resources are constantly replenished by the very problems it seems to pose, both for the painter and the viewer. Nobody in our time has posed them better or solved them more inventively than Richter.”