

## How to Paint History

Richter does not view the photographs with which he works as “cultural constructions, as we have become habituated to doing. They constitute, rather, solicitations from the past; blasted out of the continuum of time, they “drop” on his “doormat,” like “nature.” In her talk, Kaja Silverman will explore how Richter responded to two such solicitations: one embodied by a group of concentration camp photographs, and the other instantiated by a series of photographs documenting the arrest, imprisonment and deaths of three members of the German terrorist group, the RAF. Richter found the concentration camp photographs—which he published side by side with some pornographic photographs in the **Atlas**—to be “unpaintable.” Although for eleven years he feared that the same might be true of the RAF photographs, he ultimately succeeded in painting them.

The result is the monumental work, **October 18, 1977**, now owned by MoMA. What made it possible for Richter to produce this work was a complex and ever-expanding network of figural relations, which had at its center Paul Klee’s **Angelus Novus**, and Richter’s three paintings of his daughter, Betty. Already in 1988, this constellation reached backward in time to include the concentration camp photographs published in the **Atlas**. Since then, it, has grown to include Richter’s great abstract triptych, **January, December, and November**, as well as a date etched in black in our own memories: September 11, 2001.

Silverman will present her talk in two 1-hour blocks. In the first part, she will show that analogy was already the basis of Richter’s aesthetic in the mid-sixties, when he painted his early photo-pictures. It was through this form of relationality that he brought together painting and photography. Analogy also plays a decisive role in his later abstract work, rendering the latter richly referential. Initially, Richter creates analogies in which similarity predominates over difference. Later, however, he becomes interested in ones in which difference predominates over similarity. Silverman will end the first of her presentations with the most notorious of these latter analogies: that linking the concentration camp photographs to the pornographic photographs.

In her second presentation, which will follow closely from her first, Silverman will argue that Richter begins working with another kind of analogy in 1977, when he produces his first two **Betty** paintings. He does so in the wake of the events documented in the RAF photographs. It is this new kind of analogy, which has many of the properties of what Benjamin calls “Messianic time,” that permits him to elaborate the figural network described above, and that renders it so open to the future.