

## Gerhard Richter's *Station (577-2)*

By M. Therese Southgate, MD

Gerhard Richter (1932- ), *Station (577-2)*, 1985, German. Oil on canvas. 251.2 x 251.2 cm. Courtesy of the North Carolina Museum of Art, Raleigh (<http://www.ncartmuseum.org>); purchased with funds from the North Carolina Art Society (Robert F. Phifer bequest), the North Carolina Museum of Art Guild, and various donors, by exchange.



For more than 40 years, the work of the German-born painter Gerhard Richter (1932- ) has been a continual surprise; it seems to follow no predictable pattern, no predetermined path, no consistent style. And, for those who like to categorize, it has been the occasion of much critical comment, some of it unfavorable. But Richter is not interested in style, nor even in images: he is interested in painting, what it is and how it is; he seeks that elusive something at its core that makes it different from all other forms of art, whether music, poetry, or even other visual arts. Early on he painted only in grays, producing an oeuvre that looked like a pre-Technicolor world or clippings from newspapers before there was color printing. Later, he turned to color, to brilliant colors in geometric forms that exploded all over huge, larger-than-life-sized canvases. Yet, at the same time, he was producing soft-edged, atmospheric landscapes and hard-edged, brassy abstracts; his subjects could be 1940s fighter planes in a Hollywood sky or dewy-eyed babies in their mothers' arms whose slightly out-of-focus images made them look like they had been taken from the family photo album. There are pictures of death and pictures of violence, and like the world they are taken from, they coexist, often side-by-side. Some of the gray-toned paintings have an "archival" feel—forgotten images, but somehow familiar. Two of the most arresting in this category are *48 Portraits*, black-and-white oil paintings of past leaders in the arts and sciences, and *Eight Student Nurses*, their black-and-white likenesses as unremarkable as a page from their student yearbook, but which are in reality icons for a horrific mass murder. Often, the very disregard of the dramatic possibilities of a motif only heightens its drama.

Quite different—so different as to seem not to be from the hand of the same artist—is *Station (577-2)*. With its bold colors and aggressive forms, it is a work of contradictions and paradoxes: an abstract, for example, that bows to the classical style. The square format, in which neither dimension dominates the other, suggests stability and calm, a place for reflection and peace. But that notion is shattered by the broad, red stroke that breaks into the painting at the right and passes through the entire work before it tapers to a point at the left margin. The canvas surface is a tangle of forms and colors, in a sense more "modern" than Modern, yet the two principal lines, the horizontal red thrust and the vertical yellow ribbon, arrange themselves in the proportions of

the classical Golden Mean. Acid, hot, psychedelic, harsh, the colors remain as cold as a neon desert. Though the title is clear enough, it gives no clue to the subject of the work (if any). A "station" could be anything (or everything) from a depot to one's place in life. If one insists on "deciphering" *Station*, one may as well lie on one's back in the grass on a windy summer day and make camels out of clouds. Moreover, the cover reproduction is deceptive, preventing a true engagement between the work and the viewer. It is in actuality more than eight feet by eight feet, more than 64 square feet of painted surface. One begins to suspect that perhaps the subject of the painting is the painting—no more, no less.

Richter was 53 years old when he painted *Station*. He had been living in West Germany for nearly 25 years. Born in Dresden just one year before Hitler became Reich Chancellor of Germany, Richter studied at the Dresden Kunstakademie from 1951 to 1956 and also began his career in that city. In 1961, in a sequence as dramatic as his "gray" paintings, he escaped to West Germany, where he now lives. (According to published accounts, he was on a return trip from an exhibit outside East Germany when his train failed to stop in Dresden, instead continuing straight on to West Berlin. He caught a train back to Dresden, but only after he had carefully stored his belongings in West Berlin. Later, he persuaded a friend to drive him and his wife to East Berlin; where, looking like ordinary "day-trippers" without luggage, they took the subway to West Berlin.) Once in West Germany, Richter intended to continue his studies in Munich, but was persuaded to go to the Kunstakademie in Dusseldorf instead, where he remained from 1961 to 1963. He is currently the subject of a major exhibition organized by the Museum of Modern Art entitled "Gerhard Richter: Forty Years of Painting."

**Richter, *Betty*, 1988. Oil on canvas. 40 1/8" x 23 3/8" (101.9 x 59.4 cm) The Saint Louis Art Museum, St. Louis, Missouri**

