

DOMINIQUE LÉVY

ARTFORUM
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Gerhard Richter DOMINIQUE LÉVY | LONDON



Verso of Gerhard Richter's *Sänger* (Singer), 1965–66, showing a 1966 Color Chart painting, oil on canvas, 41 x 29 1/8".

Seeing Gerhard Richter's early "*Farbtafeln*" (Color Charts) reassembled for the first time since their initial presentation at Galerie Friedrich & Dahlem in Munich in 1966 is an opportunity not only to gain a better sense of how they function together as an installation but also to revisit the crucial moment when the artist decided to develop them as a group alongside his black-and-white photographic images already under way. At Dominique Lévy, nine of the original nineteen Color Charts from 1966 are shown along with a Ducolux sample card that had provided the template for liberating color from any psychological and musical associations. A further early Color Chart, a rare one in all reds, turns up on the back of a black-and-white photographic image, *Sänger* (Singer), 1965–66, which is affixed perpendicular to the gallery wall so that both sides can be seen. How the double-sided canvas came about remains unclear, but the blurred photographic image of a vocalist captured mid-song—undermining the cliché of the climactic moment—deftly situates Richter's Color Charts (which could potentially be mistaken for a formal exercise) in opposition to spectacle culture's fetishization of artistic gesture and expression.

The work in the exhibition traces the artist's experimentation with a variety of noncompositional strategies, ranging from simple emulation of the Ducolux sample, Pop-art style, to more elaborate chance procedures, such as calling on Blinky Palermo to randomly read out color names. Removing himself from the work was no straightforward undertaking. *192 Farben* (192 Colors), 1966, though arbitrary in selection and allocation of colors, still looks strikingly handpainted, and therefore subjective, including even the white interstitial space; Richter subsequently switched from using oil to enamel. In the early enamel works, a reduced range of colors—now flattened both literally and psychologically by being virtually devoid of visible brushstrokes—is distributed across the grid template at random, while the template itself changes proportions from painting to painting.

When Richter returned to the series in 1971 after a five-year break, he took the task of depersonalization to another level, replacing arbitrary design decisions with a computational system for mixing colors and a lottery system for assigning them, as seen in *180 Farben*, 1971, a variable work composed of twenty panels with blocks of three-by-three colors each, installed in one room like a mural. *180 Farben* interacts with the architectural space, in contrast with the earlier Color Charts, whose vertically arranged color stacks, as alluded to in the title of *Zwei Grau übereinander* (Two Grays, One upon the Other), 1966, have a more corporeal address. Though using fewer colors than *192 Farben*, *180 Farben* is far more complex and also more expansive, not just physically but conceptually, as the computational system for mixing colors implies infinite possibilities, of which this work represents only a fraction. *180 Farben* already evokes the contemporary world of information, whereas the paintings from 1966 recall an industrial production line.

No account of Richter's inquiry into the possibilities of painting is complete without the "Color Charts," in which he took stock of long-standing conventions of abstraction with the help of a standard item from a hardware store. We most often see them slotted in between his blurred black-and-white images, subsumed, along with his appropriated images, to the logic of the readymade. By including *Sänger*, this exhibition reverses this convention, inviting viewers to reconsider an example of Richter's photographic imagery according to the parameters of arbitrariness and abstraction laid out by the "Color Charts." Moreover, by showing a Color Chart that would normally face the wall, the exhibition offers the double-sided canvas as a heuristic device for thinking about the famously difficult question concerning the division between figuration and abstraction in Richter's work.

- Elisa Schaar