

# Richter/Meinhof-Opera

Scene 1	From Protest to Resistance
Scene 2	Solitary confinement in the 'dead section' at Ossendorf jail
Scene 3	Richter prepares to work
Scene 4	Meinhof's chance encounter with fellow Baader/Meinhof Gang inmate Astrid Proll. Guards suppress the moment
Scene 5	Richter considers his practice
Scene 6	Richter and Meinhof discuss their differences. Meinhof quotes Brecht, <i>The Measures Taken</i>
Scene 7	Andreas Baader's record player
Scene 8	Identity parade. Ulrike Meinhof and five other women detectives dressed in prison clothing are shown to witnesses. The five women are instructed: 'The person to be identified will probably resist, so please act the same way. [You should] object to being paraded, behave differently so the witnesses can have as wide as possible a choice'. Richter lists a chronology of his paintings
Scene 9	Richter makes a start

## Scene Six Duet

Meinhof: (Brecht)  
With whom would the just not sit  
To help the cause of justice?  
What medicine would taste too bitter  
To the dying?  
How low would you not stoop  
To exterminate vileness?

Richter:  
I have committed myself to thinking and acting without ideology of any kind  
I have nothing to help me  
I serve no idea  
Follow no regulations on how to respond to the world

Meinhof: (Brecht)  
If you could change the world at last,  
What would be beneath you?  
Who are you?  
Sink in the dirt,  
Embrace the slaughterer,  
But change the world: the world needs it!

Richter:  
I have no belief to show me the way  
No image of the future  
Nothing that provides me with an overriding view of reality  
I only recognise what is



David Chesworth

# RICHTER/ MEINHOF-OPERA

After a libretto by Tony MacGregor

Presented by Wax Sound Media and Art Gallery of New South Wales

Art Gallery of New South Wales, Grand Court

Friday 8 June

Saturday 9 June

45min no interval

**WARNING**  
**Adult Themes**

[www.richter-meinhof-opera.com](http://www.richter-meinhof-opera.com)  
[www.artgallery.gov.nsw.au](http://www.artgallery.gov.nsw.au)

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# Artist Statement

*Richter/Meinhof-Opera* has its origins in the controversial painting series *October 18, 1977* by the German painter Gerhard Richter. The paintings depict scenes surrounding the apparent suicides of jailed members of the notorious Baader/Meinhof Gang responsible for a deadly campaign to overthrow the West German establishment. Derived from archival newspaper photographs, the paintings caused a sensation when first exhibited in Germany in 1989. Richter's technique rendered the images ambiguous, his intentions obscure.

In the 1960s the Baader/Meinhof Gang became responsible for a string of kidnappings, bombings and finally murder, making them number one enemies of the West German state. While many on the Left rejected violence as a means to achieve their goals, they also rejected the heavy-handed crackdown by state authorities. Members of the Baader/Meinhof Gang received widespread public support, including from people who are today key figures in the German establishment. Over 30 years after their deaths in prison, the Baader/Meinhof story still resonates.

Ulrike Meinhof's death occurred a year before the deaths of fellow gang members Baader, Ensslin and Raspe. In all cases there was a mass outpouring of grief from supporters of their cause. Thousands of students came to Meinhof's funeral. During their time in prison, the gang had become huge icons for the younger West German generation.

*Richter/Meinhof-Opera* is a minimal, and at times almost mute, performance artwork that presents a selection of separate moments held in suspension.

The actions and texts in the performance are derived from records of actual events and writings of Gerhard Richter and Ulrike Meinhof. In the performance, two settings are combined within the same space. Ulrike Meinhof is in the 'dead section' of Ossendorf jail. She has been placed in isolation in an attempt to break her will. Gerhard Richter is in his studio preparing to paint his Baader/Meinhof series, *October 18, 1977*.

I have been drawn towards some of the incidental events and ancillary pieces of information lurking within the complex subject matter. We listen to the LP record that was found on the record player in Andreas Baader's cell. The record player allegedly concealed the gun he used to commit suicide, and was subsequently painted by Richter in the series. Elsewhere we hear Meinhof's impassioned calls to contact the new inmate and fellow Baader/Meinhof Gang member Astrid Proll as she takes her weekly bath. Ulrike's calls form a kind of a proto-aria, which is deliberately drowned out as guards turn on noisy

vacuum cleaners. Throughout the work, soundscapes provide a kind of aural *beiwerk*, providing additional aural accessories to the portrayed events.

Gerhard Richter and Ulrike Meinhof never met in real life. Richter says he was painting clouds at the time of Meinhof's arrest for terrorism. Instead, Richter's encounter with Meinhof is through her death.

Originally, Ulrike Meinhof had been a strong voice against the authoritarian tactics of the West German State, through her articles in left-wing magazine *Konkret* and TV appearances on discussion panels. However she became increasingly disillusioned with working as a journalist from within the system, and its failure to bring about change. Suddenly – remarkably – and to the shock of many, she opted out of the system and joined Andreas Baader, Gudrun Ensslin and others, forming an urban guerrilla group popularly known as the Baader/Meinhof Gang (officially known as the Red Army Faction) to press her ideology home through direct action. Meinhof abandoned her career, her children and her comfortable middle class lifestyle in order to achieve ideologically-driven change.

The Meinhof that Richter paints had long been silenced. She was kept in solitary isolation for eight months in the 'dead section' of Ossendorf prison in an attempt to break her. When she eventually joined other jailed members of the Baader/Meinhof Gang at Stammheim prison, she was further silenced by the others in the group, especially Gudrun Ensslin, who rewrote many of her writings in jail. Meinhof's later arguments against the fairness of the Gang's trial were also ignored. Finally, Ulrike Meinhof was literally silenced by her suicide in prison in 1976.

It is Ulrike's exhausted body that we see in Gerhard Richter's painting series, *October 18, 1977*, named after the date on which three of the Baader/Meinhof Gang were discovered dead in their Stammheim cells. Richter takes a police photograph of Ulrike's dead body and paints three versions of it. They could almost be pictures of her sleeping except that we see her throat has been ripped by the chord of the torn towel that took her life. Richter paints what might be considered a death mask, adding a final silencing of Ulrike Meinhof.

For some, Richter's paintings are open to the charge of hagiography, honouring the memory of terrorists. Many see the actions of the Baader/Meinhof Gang as an unforgivable assault on civilized society. For others, the paintings are a kind of memento mori, reminding us all of our own mortality and failed ideologies. Meinhof has for many become a mythologised figure

evoking a range of sentiments, including admiration for her courage and sympathy for her personal failure and sacrifice. Richter's paintings may well have aided this process, as *Richter/Meinhof-Opera* may also do.

*Richter/Meinhof-Opera* presents Meinhof's voice mediated in various ways. Meinhof sings 'How Low Would You Not Stoop' taken from one of Bertolt Brecht's modernist *Lehrstücke* (learning-plays) entitled *Die Massnahme (The Measures Taken)*, a fragment of which she quotes in her prison letter to Gudrun Ensslin. We also hear 'Song of the RAF' which is Meinhof's own rewrite of Brecht's 'Praise of the Party'.

History is irretrievable and any act of retelling past events produces unavoidable artifacts. Techniques used to re-tell these historic events through music, performance and art inevitably seduce and distance us from history. These techniques create distortions, which in themselves can be interesting and revealing.

*David Chesworth, June 2012*

*With additional comments from Tony MacGregor and Sonia Leber*

*On the occasion of performances at Art Gallery of New South Wales in Sydney on 8-9 June 2012.*

The sound file of the forum "Art and Politics: Unfinished Business?" with speakers David Chesworth, Dr Jolanta Nowak, Tony Bond and Tony MacGregor can be downloaded at [www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/art-politics](http://www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/art-politics)

# Credits

**Performers** Luisa Hastings Edge & Hugo Race

**Musicians** Andrea Keeble & Kirsty Vickers

**Direction, Music & Sound Design** David Chesworth

**Text** David Chesworth from the writings of Gerhard Richter, Ulrike Meinhof & Bertolt Brecht

**Lighting Designer** Travis Hodgson

**Costume Designer** Anna Cordingley

**Costume Maker** Amanda Carr

**Video Camera & Editing** Bruce Permezel

**Produced by** Wax Sound Media

**Project Curator** Sonia Leber

**Stage Manager** Amy Turton

**Photos** Sonia Leber

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David Chesworth and Sonia Leber are represented by Fehily Contemporary, Melbourne

