

not, the creator of *Richter/Meinhof-Opera* tells Kylie Northover.

MELBOURNE composer David Chesworth's new work, *Richter/Meinhof-Opera*, is one the hardest performances to define at this year's Melbourne International Arts Festival.

Inspired by a controversial suite of paintings by German artist Gerhard Richter, depicting the apparent 1976 suicides of members of the German terrorist Baader-Meinhof group, Chesworth's work imagines a meeting between Richter and journalist-turned terrorist Ulrike Meinhof, arguably history's most famous female terrorist. Richter and Meinhof are depicted by musician Hugo Race and actress Kate Kendall, their interactions set to Chesworth's soundscapes.

The work is not an opera, nor is it theatre. It's being performed in an art gallery, in the foyer of ACCA, and yet it has music.

"It's sort of an opera, but it's not opera," Chesworth says, confusing matters further. "I enjoy the confusion. I enjoy people asking, 'What is it?'"

So, what is it?

"It's a performance art work. With music in it. I'm staging it in a gallery because I didn't want it in a theatre and I certainly didn't want it to have associations with opera."

By staging it in an art gallery, Chesworth, who is also an installation artist, says the piece, set in Richter's studio and Meinhof's cell, doesn't have to explain itself. "I didn't want the pretensions of a set, the trappings of theatre," he says.

"I wanted it to appeal to people who knew how to read installations and visual arts.



Terrorist art

David Chesworth is re-examining Ulrike Meinhof "in light of what pop culture has added to her mythology and how we view radical terrorist characters".

PICTURE: RODGER CUMMINS

They know something's there for a reason. Some people know how to read things that way and other people just want... *Mary Poppins*."

Drawing on writing from both Richter and Meinhof, as well as records from the time, *Richter/Meinhof-Opera* is billed as "an exploration of the limits of representation and direct action".

Still a controversial topic in Germany, the Baader-Meinhof story belongs to a different era of terrorism from that of today.

The left-wing Red Faction Army, of which Baader-Meinhof was part, was an anti-imperialist "urban guerilla

group" founded by Andreas Baader, which used violent resistance against what it saw as fascism.

"The profile of terrorism has changed so much since those times," says Chesworth. "Richter's paintings caused a huge stir when he showed them in 1989. Painting dead terrorists is tantamount to turning them into icons and humanising them. But we have to remember they were already mythical figures.

"German friends in Melbourne who lived through this time have told me how amazing this time was — there was a huge support for this

terrorist organisation in West Germany, which you can't imagine now, post-9/11."

Richter's paintings are based on news photos of Meinhof and Baader's prison cells, taken after their deaths. Alongside the controversial images of the pair's dead bodies are intriguing shots of the quotidian — a record player with an LP on it, a crammed bookshelf.

"I'm looking at how we look at Meinhof today; what does she represent, and in light of what pop culture has added to her mythology and how we view radical terrorist characters like Che Guevara and herself,"

says Chesworth. "Baader was very connected to pop culture; records, books, the *Bonnie and Clyde* aspect. We will actually find out what the record is that is being played in that photo — that's my big reveal and it's extraordinary."

The piece also examines the way history can be perverted through re-interpretation.

"Those moments were incredible moments of their time — there were so many different influences that went to make those moments unique, and any re-portrayal through text, or staging or setting things to song, distorts and changes whatever was the

truth," Chesworth says. "This work is an acknowledgement of how a piece that tries to represent a historical event is always going to create distortion, but also drag up interesting new perspectives."

It is, he says "an idea piece".

"It's like visual theatre — a moving installation or performance art work.

"Having worked in the musical and visual arts world, I like to blur those edges."

Richter/Meinhof-Opera, October 14-15, 7pm and 8.30pm; October 16, 8pm and 9.30pm.
melbournefestival.com.au