Reflections on Gerhard Richter’s Cologne Cathedral Window

Donato Loia

The lost unity between art and religion […] cannot be regained at will. This unity was not a matter of purposeful cooperation, but resulted from the whole objective structure of society during certain phases of history.

Theodor W. Adorno

But although these abstract paintings refer beyond themselves […] they do not tell us what they are referring to. It is we who must provide the missing term.

Kaja Silverman

In Catholic culture, light has traditionally symbolized the descent of the divine into the human world (Figure 1). Abbot Suger (1122-51), a leading ecclesiastical politician of the twelfth century, equated “Divine Light” with the light shining through stained glass. This philosophy of “Divine Light” reasoned that humans could encounter God as natural light streamed through the panes of brightly colored glass windows. Thus, light, as it illuminated the religious stories depicted in gothic stained glass, played an important metaphorical role, symbolically representing goodness and beauty.1 When the Cologne Cathedral Chapter commissioned Gerhard Richter to replace a nineteenth-century window destroyed during the Second World War, he knew he would be confronting a daunting tradition.2 As Richter himself claimed, the location of the Cologne Cathedral window is a special one “which carries a greater burden of history [than others].”3

Against the Cathedral Chapter’s request for a figurative design of twentieth-century martyrs, Richter decided on a geometric, abstract design, comprised of a randomly distributed grid of 11,500 hand-blown squares of glass in 72 colors matching the existing palette of the cathedral’s remaining medieval windows (Figure 2). About five-hundred different chromatic hues appear approximately twenty times in the window and, as Richter explains, “half of the squares [have been] allotted by means of a random generator, the other [are] a mirror image of the ones randomly allocated”4 (Figure 3). When refracted through the window, the light disperses into a dazzling array of colors. In considering this work, one might be satisfied simply to contemplate the sensuous interplay of light and colors. However, Richter’s design is not only meant to captivate but also to provoke. By choosing this design of geometric shapes, Richter deliberately engages with his window’s Christian setting, characterizing his work as unconventionally devotional.5 Thus, the window provokes a number of questions about its religious context: Is Richter’s window merely part of the broader cultural transformation of cathedrals from sites of religious pilgrimage into secular tourism?6 What is the place of Richter’s window for the long history of the relation of art and religion? What is the meaning of this window within the context of the cathedral? In this paper, my ambition is to provide some preliminary interpretations of Richter’s window exploring the complex triangulation of art, secularity, and religiosity within this work.

Scholars have offered a variety of interpretations. For instance, the Jesuit priest-curator Friedhelm Mennekes con-

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4 The Cathedral Window was not the first time Richter received a religious commission. For instance, Richter completed Abstract Picture (Rhombus) in 1998, a project initiated by representatives of the Catholic Church, who approached him with the idea of painting the stigmatization of Saint Francis for a modern church designed by the architect Renzo Piano. For an interpretation of the Abstract Picture (Rhombus) and an interpretation of religious themes in Richter’s work see Robert Storr, Gerhard Richter: Doubt and Belief in Painting (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2003), 139-149.

7 There are many examples of modern and contemporary artists who contributed to a religious space without following or seeking any devotional tradition. See, for instance, Louise Nevelson’s chapel in New York or Fernand Léger’s window cycle in Audincourt.
8 The sociologist Graham Howes observes that while in many places, particularly in England, “public observance is contracting, church, and especially cathedral, visiting is expanding,” as they “become sites of essentially secular pilgrimage.” Graham Howes, The Art of the Sacred: An Introduction to the Aesthetics of Art and Belief (London and New York: Tauris, 2007).
siders the window as a “membrane” for the transubstantiation of the material into the spiritual.” Richter, however, has always been of two minds about the capacity of abstraction to manifest spiritual content. In the late 1990s he confessed in an interview with Mark Rosenthal that he was “less antagonistic to ‘the holy’, to the spiritual experience [and that today] we need that quality.” On the other hand, in an earlier conversation with art historian Benjamin Buchloh, Richter described his abstract works as, “[a]n assault on the falsity and the religiosity of the way people glorified abstraction, with such phony reverence.” Hence, even if Richter grants that we need a “spiritual” quality in life, it is speculative to suggest that his abstractions are gateways to the “spiritual,” whatever this word might mean. Dorotheé Brill’s argument is more elegant, but iners a debateable desire in Richter “to create an image of something that we cannot picture, since it is beyond the limits of our sense experiences [and] Richter’s conclusions regarding the nonrepresentable nature of the divine arise not—or not only—from spiritual insight but from [the] preoccupation, for decades now, with the nature of pictures and their limits.” Now, the problem of how to figure the unfigurable runs throughout the visual arts in the twentieth century. From Kazimir Malevich (1879-1935)’s investigations of the fourth dimension to Harold Rosenberg’s definition of Barnett Newman (1905-1970) as a “theologian of nothingness,” the obsession with what exceeds the limits of our sense experience has been a preoccupation for many twentieth-century artists (Figure 4). However, if we take into consideration the window’s compositional strategy and Richter’s writings, this window does not share much of this preoccupation. Hence, we must be more specific in explaining if and in which way this abstract window refers beyond itself.

The making of the window is heterodox. Richter found inspiration in his chance-generated Color Charts, which he produced between 1966 and 1974 (Fig. 5). As Richter explains, the use of randomly chosen colors in the Color Charts was meant to create “meaningless forms.” Art historian Robert Storr has correctly noted that “[the Color Charts] set aside the issue of composition, and contained and suppressed gesture in favor of a blandly impersonal facture […].” Less an expression of their own “self-sufficiency” or of any form of Greenbergian modernist narrative, Richter’s abstractions actually resist painterly expressivity and subjectivity. Likewise, computer software arbitrarily generated the window’s colorful hues. The accidental color relations produced by the software and the rigid grid helped Richter avoid any unintended figures or repeated pattern. In both Color Charts and the window, the chance-based process and Richter’s sublimation of his hands-on involvement favor the impersonal and the neutral. The generation of early abstract painters, like Wassily Kandinsky (1866-1944) or Hilma af Klint (1862-1944), rested on the Romantic assumption of the self-expression of the subject and of a spiritual realm beyond the material contingency of the artwork (Figures 6 and 7). On the contrary, Richter’s compositional strategy works to deny individuality by using a mechanical, impersonal, chance-based style. Similarly, art historian Benjamin Buchloh has already commented on Richter’s window as “aleatory chromatic constellations” characterized by a dialectic of structural “confinement” and the freedom of “random chromatic distribution.” Buchloh’s valuable insights, however, leave the philosophical, theological, and socio-historical implications of this dialectic unclear.

15 Storr, Gerhard Richter: Doubt and Belief in Painting, 89.
16 The same might be said about Richter’s gestural abstractions: a “strange mechanism […] does govern the facture of his abstractions no less than of his representations” and demonstrates a “new order of needless and meaningless’ design.” Foster, The First Pop Age, 183-184.
17 For a discussion of Richter’s commission and his “compositional” strategy see also Koestlé-Cate, Art and the Church: A Fractious Embrace. Ecclesiastical Encounters with Contemporary Art (London and New York: Routledge 2016), 79-81.
It is true that around the year 2000 Richter made some references to his own growing interest in religion, but at the same time Richter himself resists spiritualistic or quasi-mystical interpretations of his work and favors its labor-made quality and simple “beauty.” In an interview with curator Hans-Ulrich Obrist, Richter said:

[…] with the cathedral window we’re talking about something quite concrete, something real […] any supplementation with modern art often comes across as inhibited, false, silly or kitsch. In order to avoid this danger, I have taken the place as it is: what does the cathedral look like, how is it used? And in so doing, I’ve avoided wanting anything special. So: no depictions of saints, no message and, in a certain sense, not even art. It was just to be a radiantly beautiful window, as good and beautiful and with as many meanings as I could make it here and now. […] Nothing like [illustrating or depicting]. Simply this very simple design, realized optimally.

In this statement, Richter reveals at least three major objectives: first, to neutralize any possible association with early abstract art; second, to discourage any symbolic meaning for his work; finally, to emphasize the window’s significance not as art, but as labor capable of producing a simple, beautiful experience. But why is Richter so concerned in stressing the beautiful quality of his work, undermining the window’s value as art, and resisting any attempt to give it meaning? A first possible reply would take Richter at his word. The window simply provides a beautiful experience, since it is deprived of any iconographic representations or intentions thanks to the random-process escamotage. Therefore, it renders any interpretative account simply redundant. A second reply says Richter’s statement has more specific, but not clearly stated, ambitions, which, if we understood them, might allow us to grasp the logic of this window in a more sophisticated way.

We need to keep in mind that the random-process of the software program aroused the ire of Cologne’s Archbishop, Cardinal Meisner. What disturbed the Cardinal Meisner was not the window’s abstraction as such, but its computer-generated arbitrariness. For the Archbishop, this compositional subjection to chance failed to reflect the spirit of its Christian context. Now, as puzzling as might appear, the Archbishop’s interpretation is revelatory when considered within a broader context. Such context will help make sense of what Buchloh implies about the window’s dialectic of confinement and freedom of “random chromatic distribution.”

Let’s consider philosopher Jürgen Habermas’s definition of religion: “Every religion is originally a ‘conception of the world’ or a ‘comprehensive doctrine’ in the sense that it claims the authority to structure a form of life in its entirety.” Now, if every religion is a meaningful conception of the world, Richter’s meaningless, random form makes us consider the modern impossibility of detaching a sense of the sacred from skepticism, belief from doubt. This window manifests in its sensuous forms not only the seductive beauty of colorful lights but also the changed conditions of modern religious belief—that is, a move from a society where belief in God is unchallenged to one in which God faces the possibility of not-meaning. Indeed, the random juxtaposition of colors in Richter’s work represents the changed conditions of modern religious belief, capturing the forced coexistence of faith and doubt, meaning and meaninglessness that exists for believers.

But we can also adopt a less apocalyptic, postmodern stance and read this window in a different light, that is, by considering the place of religion in the modern world. Again, the logic of the window becomes more intelligible if we consult Habermas:

Under the circumstances of the secularization of knowledge, of the neutralization of state authority, and of the generalized freedom of religion, religion has had to give up this claim to interpretive monopoly and to a comprehensive organization of life. The conception of tolerance in liberally constituted, pluralistic societies demands that believers recognize that they must sensibly reckon with the continued existence of dissent in their dealings with nonbelievers, as well as with those of other faiths. And the same recognition is demanded, within the framework of a liberal political culture, of nonbelievers in their dealings with believers.

My second argument, which draws on this passage from Habermas, suggests that, beyond the sensuous experience of beauty, this window formally materializes the coexistence of religious and secular discourses as a distinctive trait of

20 For example, during an interview in which J. Thorn-Prikker asked him to comment about “the fundamentally religious tenor” in his work, Richter replied: “I sympathize with the Catholic Church. I can’t believe in God, but I think the Catholic Church is marvellous. […] my attitude towards the church had already radically changed, and I had slowly begun to realize what the church can offer, how much meaning it can convey, how much help, comfort and security.” Richter, “Interview with J. Thorn-Prikker, 2004” in Writings, 471-2.
22 Koestlé-Cate, Art and the Church, 79-80.
24 A similar characterization of contemporary religion has been proposed by Jacques Derrida. Derrida’s “religion” appears as a religion without God, without certainty and, even without a project (if by “project” we define a path to salvation). For more on forms of postmodern religiosity see Edward Baring, and Peter Gordon, editors. The Trace of God: Derrida and Religion (New York: Fordham University Press 2015).
modern pluralism. Richter’s compositional strategy does not deny the religious, but rather problematizes its existence. Richter’s use of a software program might be read as a strategy to avoid any meaningful figuration—for example, the representation of twentieth-century martyrs—as required by the cathedral’s commission. But adopting a machine did not help him to create a “meaningless” pattern but instead helped him avoid creating a meaningful representation. In other terms, Richter’s window is not strictly “meaningless,” but rather not meaningful in the way a religion might claim not help him to create a “meaningless” pattern but instead the representation of twentieth-century martyrs—as required for example, in a strategy to avoid any meaningful figuration—for example, in the eyes of the Art World any mixture of art and religion goes against the grain of the history of modern art which is, among other things, the history of the emancipation of art from external authorities. Without any reference to the long history of the “autonomization of art” it is hard to make sense of this window and Richter’s statements. To explain briefly, what we differentiate today as art and religion had been for a long time indistinguishable. The process of the “autonomization of art,” as studied by a significant number of scholars, is a phenomenon that began roughly during the Renaissance for a variety of reasons, including the rise of the status of the artist, the expansion of the art market, the diminishing of artists’ guilds, the progressive institutionalization of the discipline of art history, and so on. As Peter Bürger points out in his Theory of the Avantgarde, an autonomous idea of art was inconceivable for the “Sacral Art” and for to argue, must be read as part of the historical process of secularization, that is, the reduction of religious beliefs to an option, and not a certainty.

Now, there is at least another important argument implicit in Richter’s statement which we must consider in order to make sense of his work. Richter’s references to a simple design, “realized optimally,” lacking a “message” and, in a certain sense, not even “art,” allows him to render this work unique and exceptional within his own artistic career. But why is this so important for Richter? Because in the eyes of the Art World any mixture of art and religion goes against the grain of the history of modern art which is, among other things, the history of the emancipation of art from external authorities. Without any reference to the long history of the “autonomization of art” it is hard to make sense of this window and Richter’s statements. To explain briefly, what we differentiate today as art and religion had been for a long time indistinguishable. The process of the “autonomization of art,” as studied by a significant number of scholars, is a phenomenon that began roughly during the Renaissance for a variety of reasons, including the rise of the status of the artist, the expansion of the art market, the diminishing of artists’ guilds, the progressive institutionalization of the discipline of art history, and so on. As Peter Bürger points out in his Theory of the Avantgarde, an autonomous idea of art was inconceivable for the “Sacral Art” and for


27 I owe a debt of gratitude to my colleague and friend Lisa Gulesserian for this observation.

28 Crucial for my arguments here have been Richard Shiff’s suggestions on how to interpret the category of “meaninglessness” and, in particular, his consideration that “the true test of faith is to have faith without relying on a doctrine” (personal communication, May 21, 2019).

29 It is questionable that “beauty” is the only aesthetic predicate that is a “value” and “descriptive” at the same time. For “beauty” is an historical category that changes over time. Moreover, for some people “naturality” might be also considered as a descriptive predicate that is also often considered as a “value.” Nevertheless, it is also true that in our own historical time “beauty” can be adopted without any further qualification in order to express a value. For a discussion see Arthur Danto, “The Art Seminar” in Art History versus Aesthetics, edited by James Elkins (New York: Routledge, 2006), 52.

30 The changed conditions of belief in the modern world have been famously theorized by the philosopher Charles Taylor. For a discussion see Charles Taylor, A Secular Age (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007).

the “Courtly Art” with their cultic purposes.  

Now, for the contemporary Art World, every art form that goes against this history of the emancipation of art from cultic purposes is regressive. Hence, the need for Richter to minimize any “meaning,” “message,” even the presence of “art.” Only within this historical, theoretical context, can we understand the paradoxical adoption of meaningless forms, Richter’s reference to the category of beauty, and Richter’s denial of artistic choice or expression. But why paradoxical? The reference to beauty and the randomizing software allows Richter to preserve that modern capacity of self-determination, that is, to acquire a set of constitutive values different from those obtained in religious and ethical domains. In this way, Richter’s preserves an “autonomous,” that is, a strictly modern quality in his work. Indeed, beauty itself is a classic modernist category for approaching art. On the other hand, Richter undermines any artistic quality of his work because of its controversial location and, therefore, feels the need to reduce his window to simple craftsmanship, to a “very simple design, realized optimally,” and finally, to “not even art.”

Richter’s own statements and the interpretations of art scholars do not make us fully consider the arguments that I have tried to articulate. Obviously, we could be satisfied with explanations about the sensuous experience of beauty or about correspondence with a transcendental content if we agreed that the “primacy of the reader” (that is, the autonomous and subjective interpretation provided by a viewer) is more valuable than the dialectical relation between object and subject, and their precarious coexistence. My point is that addressing this work only through the category of beauty or a “spiritual” content annihilates its place in a historical context, its compositional strategy, and the specificity of its location.

In an interview that is revealing for the interpretation I’m offering here, Richter told Buchloh:

If I now think of your interpretation of Mondrian, in which pictures can partly be interpreted as models of society I can see my abstracts as metaphors in their own right, pictures that are about a possibility of social coexistence. Looked at this way, all that I am trying to do in each picture is to bring together the most disparate and mutually contradictory elements, alive and viable, in the greatest possible freedom. No Paradises.

Similarly, I see this abstract window as a metaphor in its own right for the complex coexistence of the secular and the religious, the doubtful and the meaningful, unbelief and belief in our own time.

Even a ray of light exists under the pressure of historical transformation and the “Light” that once entered a Gothic Cathedral is not necessarily the same light which permeates these religious spaces today (Figure 8). Light may refer to sensory experience; it may be a religious metaphor in that Light can be a vehicle by which God manifests His presence in the world. Light may also be the Enlightenment’s metaphor of choice in that knowledge is “light” and morality is a guiding lamp. Richter’s work demonstrates that “Beyond the Light” there is not non-light, but light—that is, a sort of faith that

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32 For the dissociation of art from the praxis of life see Peter Bürger, Theory of the Avant-garde (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984). I cannot fully develop this idea here, but I have begun to notice a parallel displacement of religions from the “public sphere” and the separation of art from the praxis of life. As anthropologist Talal Asad posits, pre-Enlightenment Christian theologians did not formulate a distinction between “speculative” and “practical” religious practices because, in addition to manifesting “participants’ interior beliefs,” religious practices “were means of producing truths, […] creating virtuous individuals and defining religious communities.” The Enlightenment’s separation between “speculative” and “practical” elements of religion motivated the expulsion of religion as a thing of this world and the transference of religion to a strictly sui generis, otherworldly realm. I believe that both arguments—the separation of art from religion and the internal schism within the religious between “speculative” and “practical” elements—are part of a broader project that Jürgen Habermas calls “diremption” [Entzweigung], that is, the process of specialization, differentiation, and autonomization of spheres of knowledge, a process which was foundational in the development of modernity. For the concept of “Diremption” see Jürgen Habermas, The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity, Twelve Lectures (Cambridge, MASS: MIT Press 1990), 19. For the differentiation of the spheres of knowledge see also Jürgen Habermas and Seyla Ben-Habib, “Modernity versus Postmodernity” in New German Critique, No. 22, Special Issue on Modernism (Winter, 1981): 3-14. For a summary of Asad’s analyses of the distinction between “speculative” and “practical” religious practices see Derek Peterson and Darren Walhof, editors, The Invention of Religion: Rethinking Belief in Politics and History (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2002), 3-4.

33 This is an argument that has been noticed by Max Weber in his Economy and Society: “The more art becomes an autonomous sphere […] the more art tends to acquire its own set of constitutive values, which are quite different from those obtaining in the religious and ethical domain.” Max Weber, “The Tension between Ethical Religion and Art.” In Economy and Society. An Outline of Interpretive Sociology (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), 608.


36 In this perspective, this abstract window is, to a certain extent, a metaphor for Richter’s whole career. Storr observes that “The drama of Gerhard Richter’s artistic life has consisted of repeated encounters with totalizing systems of thought that dictated how he should conduct himself and what his painting should be. First, these ideological mandates were issued by authoritarian political regimes. By the time he had achieved art-world recognition in the late 1960s, they issued from the avant-garde in whose midst he had landed.” The window’s neutralizing content actually presents a master narrative in Richter’s work. For the quoted passage: Storr, Gerhard Richter: Doubt and Belief in Painting, 83.

37 Richter has provided conflicting statements about the role of light in his work. As reported by Foster, Richter says, “The central problem in my painting is light.” But in Writings he also says, “I was never interested in light. Light is there and you turn it on or you turn it off, with sun or without sun. I don’t know what the ‘problematic of light’ is.” Foster, The First Pop Age, 199 and Richter, “Moma Interview with Robert Storr, 2002,” in Writings, 404.
has not an “assured credal object” but instead resembles an “open-ended but risky promise.”

Referring to Richter’s abstract paintings, Kaja Silverman has noted: “Although they do not make any concessions to figuration, one cannot stand for very long in front of them without beginning to see things […] they invite us to search within them for phenomenal forms.” The same might be said for the Cathedral’s window. Richter asks us to search for “phenomenal forms.” But the “unfigurable,” the “ineffable” within this window is of a political and existential kind—it has to do with the spiritual and transcendental, but only if we humble our notion of the transcendental, interpreting it in a more ordinary way. What is spiritual in this window, probably, is a quest for meaning where meanings cannot be taken for granted anymore. Perhaps, Richter wants to remind us that God and beauty are only different names for something with the power to undermine meaninglessness, a threat which existed as much for the middle ages as it does for us today. The “ineffable” that appears and disappears constantly within the phenomenal forms of this window, and within the forms of our existence, is only another name for our perennial duty to understand.

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38 This is also the definition of Derrida’s religiosity that is provided by Caputo in Baring and Gordon, The Trace of God: Derrida and Religion, 154. In general, my overall argument is influenced by the discussion in postmodern circles. For an overview see: John D. Caputo and Gianni Vattimo, After the Death of God, edited by Jeffrey W. Robbins, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007).

Figure 1. Carl Hertel, Cathedral of Cologne, Interior view of center aisle and vault, black and white photography, 23.9 x 19.8 cm. From ArtStor Public Collections.
Figure 2. Gerhard Richter, Cologne Cathedral, Stained Glass Window of the South Transept and Quadribbed Vaulted Ceiling, built in 1948 and reglazed in 2007, Cologne, Germany. Photo credit: Frank Krumbach.
Figure 3. Gerhard Richter, Cologne Cathedral, Stained Glass Window of the South Transept and Quadribbed Vaulted Ceiling, Built in 1948 and reglazed in 2007, Cologne, Germany. Photo credit: Frank Krumbach.
Figure 5. Gerhard Richter, *4096 Colours*, 1974, 254 cm x 254 cm, Lacquer on canvas, © Atelier Gerhard Richter 2019.
Figure 7. Hilma af Klint, Group X, No. 1, Altarpiece, from Altarpieces, 1915, Oil and metal leaf on canvas, 93 1/2 × 70 7/10 in, 237.5 × 179.5 cm. © Hilma af Klint Foundation.
Figure 8. Gerhard Richter, Cologne Cathedral, Stained Glass Window of the South Transept and Quadribbed Vaulted Ceiling, Built in 1948 and reglazed in 2007, detail, Cologne, Germany. Photo credit: Frank Krumbach.