

## Chapter 6

### Glass, Soil, and Feathers

#### An Encounter with Contemporary Liturgical Art

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#### 1. Introduction

The question we want to pose in this chapter could be formulated like this: is there an aesthetics of the sacred in Christianity? How can the connection between the religious form of Christian liturgy and the aesthetic expression in visual art be grasped and described so that it appears neither as a simple juxtaposition nor as a dialectical polarity nor as a relationship in which one instrumentalizes the other? Of course, we are not the first ones to ask this question; it is the consequence of the modern call for a separation of powers between religion and art. But this question continues to be asked today, again and again, and it seems as if the discussion is turning in circles. In the hopes that we will not just repeat the past but add something new to the discussion, our reflections will focus on the *experience* of modern or contemporary liturgical art, an aspect neglected in scholarship thus far. After a brief theoretical framing of the aspects of the question we pose here, we will focus on two examples of art created for the liturgical space, and the reception processes they initiate: the stained glass windows by Gerhard Richter in the Cathedral of Cologne (2007) and the intervention *W Erde Licht* by Elke Maier and Georg Planer in Klagenfurt Cathedral (2009).

In different ways, both of these works encourage a way of seeing that is beyond the instrumentalizing, grasping kind of seeing in everyday life and

is instead a contemplative seeing that is free from the limitations of content or meaning. While relating to the space of the church in which these works are placed, permanently or temporarily, they are not in service of this space and the liturgy taking place in it but they co-create the space as sacred in the mutual relationships between artwork, space, and viewers that are enacted in different ways in different moments in time and with different individuals. Thus, when we speak of ›liturgical art‹ in the following, while we discuss works situated in the liturgical space of the church, we do not refer here to those works that are predetermined by ecclesial authorities as belonging to the sacred space of the church or that are created to serve the liturgical practices performed in it via external criteria of subject matter or use. Instead, further developing the thoughts we have pursued throughout this volume, we consider how these works may be integrated into the ›total work‹ of the liturgy performed in space and community through how they are experienced by their viewers in time and space.

## 2. An Attempt at a Differentiated Evaluation

It might be helpful to start these reflections with a simple fact that is often overlooked, namely the sheer quantity of objects of sacred art and architecture. Evaluations of the artistic production of the church in late modernity until today often employ an exclusively Western or, even more narrowly, Eurocentric perspective which delimits the appreciation of this broad, diverse enterprise in its world-wide expanse. Since the end of the 19th century, more churches, chapels, baptisteries, prayer rooms, tabernacles, paintings, sculptures, liturgical vessels, church furniture, devotional objects and so on have been created around the world than ever before. It is easy to lose sight of this fact in the de-Christianized Western context where churches are no more than the traces of an illustrious past and of interest primarily as tourist attractions, and while aesthetically appreciated, they are really quite superfluous, often having to be protected from being pulled down or converted to other uses. In other parts of the world, however, the creation of liturgical art and sacred spaces of various Christian denominations continues and flourishes alongside the growth of Christianity outside of the European-North-Atlantic area, and thus the questions we are asking about

it here are of abiding interest. Furthermore, this awareness of the multitude of Christian artworks of various genres further underlines the public dimension of Christianity in an increasingly plural global context and can be seen as a measure of the capacity of Christianity to communicate its values openly and publicly.

The issue of Christian liturgical art (not: *Christian* art, as discussed in previous chapters) is complex because the parameters of the discussion vary depending on the context: Catholic, Protestant, or Orthodox, European or non-European, Western, Westernized, or Indigenous. It is therefore important to avoid generalizations. If the way in which liturgical space is artistically formed not only expresses Christian faith and practice but also shapes it, we have to acknowledge that this space also expresses the diversity, even contradictoriness, of faith. For the European Catholic context, which provides the primary context for this chapter, the most prominent aspect is certainly the continual difficulty of the church to relate in a constructive fashion to new forms of artistic expression and communication. But there are signs, even if few, that point to the beginning of a fruitful dialogue between ecclesial sponsors and artists to be taken up in further theoretical reflections on liturgical art.

But isn't it problematic in itself to qualify art through its use within the liturgical space of a church? How can one justify the determination of the artwork through the finality of its use given the autonomy achieved for art in modernity, and also given the fact that the artwork in itself does not have a finality and does not exist for a particular, externally attributed use, nor for pedagogical instruction, nor as the underpinning of ideological constructs but as sheer, revealing form? One could certainly argue that the finality of an artwork for liturgical use is not the same as any other utilitarian purpose and that Christian liturgy itself, like art, is beyond the confines of everyday life with its clearly defined interests and finalities. Liturgy as the epiphany of the sacred<sup>1</sup> cannot – and should not – ascribe a more specific or objective finality to art than it has itself, which can only be described in terms of anticipation, as the prefiguration of the fullness of life in community with other human beings, with all of creation, and with God.<sup>2</sup> This very general state-

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1 Romano Guardini, *Die Sinne und die religiöse Erkenntnis*, 2nd ed., Würzburg: Werkbund Verlag, 1958, 51.

2 Joseph Ratzinger, *The Spirit of the Liturgy*, translated by John Saward, San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2000, 14.

ment has to be concretized in its importance for the specific relationships between ecclesial sponsors (dioceses, arts committees, priests, etc.) and the artists who are commissioned with the realization of works to be exhibited, temporarily or permanently, in the space of the church.

Yet in spite of the recognition that art not be instrumentalized for external purposes, the question of art's finality in the liturgical context remains a central issue in the debates surrounding it, especially when it is employed in the attempt to control artistic creativity. In 1950, in the journal *L'Art Sacré*, the French Dominican Marie-Alain Couturier, a progressive thinker in these issues, summarizes the most frequent objections against the commissioning of great contemporary artists for the decoration of new churches. The main argument is not that they are non-believers or too expensive, but that »[t]hey will not do what we want«. <sup>3</sup> Couturier answers thus: »Thank God! for too often ›what we want‹, what people like, is far inferior to what great artists would do even if left to their inspiration alone. And, in any case, experience proves that even when he [sic] is left to his own inspiration, what a great artist produces out of himself is infinitely more valid than the inevitable trash done by docile second-raters, these being generally obliging in proportion to their mediocrity.« <sup>4</sup> But Couturier's rigid – and somewhat polemical – distinction between artworks by artists who obey any demand by ecclesial authorities and art created by artists who abandon themselves completely to their own creative powers shows that Couturier has given up on the possibility of a constructive negotiation between artists and ecclesial sponsors because of the latter's unjustified claims to control the artists.

It has to be kept in mind that Couturier wrote this in 1950, that is, before the Second Vatican Council which, however, in this particular aspect, did not entirely eliminate the ambiguities in the church's attitude towards the arts. In the Liturgical Constitution *Sacrosanctum Concilium* (§§122–123) it says, »Holy Mother Church has therefore always been the friend of the fine arts and has ever sought their noble help [...] The Church has been particularly careful to see that sacred furnishings should worthily and beautiful-

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3 Marie-Alain Couturier, To the Great Men, the Great Works [1950], in: Marie-Alain Couturier, *Sacred Art*, texts selected by Dominique de Menil and Pie Duployé, translated by Granger Ryan, Austin: University of Texas Press/Menil Foundation, 1989, 33–36, here 36 (original emphasis).

4 Couturier, To the Great Men, the Great Works, 36.

ly serve the dignity of worship [...] The art of our own days [...] shall also be given free scope in the Church, provided that it adorns the sacred buildings and holy rites with due reverence and honor«. <sup>5</sup> Thus, the condition for the friendship of the church is the continued understanding of the role of contemporary art as serving the church and its liturgical practice, as it was in the past. While on the one hand, this understanding is certainly justified and implies great appreciation of the arts as a contribution to the liturgy and pastoral care, on the other hand, the Council does not acknowledge the need for mutuality in true friendship. The statement in the Liturgical Constitution does not recognize that the ›service‹ of the arts amounts to much more than the passive obedience to the expectations and instructions of the church and its representatives, and that sometimes – thank God!, as Couturier says – especially when emancipated from such instructions, the arts open up spaces for an experience that permits the purification of the Christian memory and life of faith, precisely through the liberation from the ecclesial control of the motifs, iconography, and conventions of artistic creation, returning the responsibility to the artists and recipients. According to Gerhard Larcher, this mutuality in the relationship between art and church does not have to lead to the identification of their horizons, a flattening of their respectively unique contribution, but to »a certain convergence in the quest for meaning« in which »the difference of the expectations of meaning of each is reflected«. <sup>6</sup>

Recognizing the competence of the arts to create meaning that cannot be assimilated or even reduced to specific doctrines or church teachings implies acknowledging the impossibility of deducing the aesthetic dimension from other external factors. This means, for example, admitting that the capacity of an altarpiece to move the viewers emotionally cannot be judged according to its subject, as we discussed in previous chapters. This has the twofold consequence of recognizing first, that a religious subject matter is not enough

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5 Paul VI., Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy *Sacrosanctum Concilium* (1963), [https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_const\\_19631204\\_sacrosanctum-concilium\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19631204_sacrosanctum-concilium_en.html) [accessed 2 October 2025].

6 Gerhard Larcher, *Annäherungsversuche von Kunst und Glaube: Ein fundamentaltheologisches Skizzenbuch*, Wien: LIT Verlag, 2005, 65; in the original: »einer gewissen Konvergenz der Sinnsuche«; »zugleich auch die Andersheit der je eigenen Sinnerwartungen spiegelt«.

to ›guarantee‹ the impact of an artwork on its viewer's interior life and second, that a ›profane‹ artwork can be capable of evoking a religious experience that pulls the viewers outside of themselves and opens up, momentarily at least, a different world for them. This capacity does not depend on the content of an artwork but on the commensurability between the work and the emotional experience it solicits which becomes clear in the eyes of the beholders only when they use their receptive activity with this goal or at least are open to the possibility. Drawing on an expression by literary theorist Earl Wassermann, Charles Taylor speaks of the »subtler languages«<sup>7</sup> that the arts have developed since the Romantic turn and through which they have liberated themselves from the intentionality of subject matters and their assertive, representative function in order to move into a new space where »ontic commitments [...] can remain largely unidentified.«<sup>8</sup> But what does this new space of aesthetic experience and the emotions evoked by it mean in relation to the conceptualization and realization of liturgical art?

### 3. Openness and Contemplation

In trying to answer this question, it is important to take into account the legitimately diverse expectations and preferences of believers whom the artistically created space of the church wants to inspire in their active, communal, and responsible participation in the liturgy and their personal (though also critical) engagement in church and society. In addition, each artistic contribution has to be considered within the context of the church as both the Body of Christ and a material space which, according to the liturgical reform of the Council, represents the qualifying context for the active participation of the *christifideles* as agents in the liturgy which is itself understood as the art of communal celebration. Finally, one has to take into account the perspective of the occasional visitor who enters a church looking for a moment of quiet or meditation without a sustained commitment and participation in the liturgical practices taking place in the building.

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7 Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007, 365. Taylor draws on Earl R. Wasserman, *The Subtler Language: Critical Readings of Neoclassic and Romantic Poems*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1959.

8 Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 360.

Given these various considerations, we have to ask ourselves if the ambition of liturgical art to evoke such a quest for meaning in its viewers through its aesthetic element might be exaggerated, perhaps even contradictory? How could the »subtler languages« of contemporary art enable this dynamic? And even if it was possible, would one not risk ascribing an excessive power to art that competes with religious experience so that art becomes an »aesthetic church«<sup>9</sup> and religion a fetish, an aestheticized, empty formula without power?<sup>10</sup> Is the price to pay for the valorization of the aesthetic experience of the artwork the devalorization of the liturgical one?

Romano Guardini argues that what a viewer expects from the reception of an artwork is »not only a seeing or hearing, as with the other objects of one's surroundings; nor even a pleasure and amusement, as with something enjoyable. Rather, the artwork opens up a space into which the human being can enter, in which they can breathe, move and interact with the objects and people that have been revealed. But this requires some effort – and thus, at this particular point, the task becomes clear which is as urgent for us today as none other, namely that of contemplation.«<sup>11</sup> Here, Guardini opens up a new perspective in which the tensions between the particularity of the religious-liturgical purpose and the indeterminacy of the aesthetic-artistic dimension are dissolved. He describes the possibilities of experience offered in an artwork as a passage that opens up to an undefined dimension where it is possible to move and breathe freely, as a rupture in the everyday life with its obligations in which seeing and hearing, and even the pleasure we experience in it, are always oriented towards the achievement of a certain goal.

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- 9 The term is Friedrich Hölderlin's, quoted in Horst Schwebel, *Die Kunst und das Christentum: Geschichte eines Konflikts*, München: C.H. Beck, 2002, 196; in the original: »ästhetische[] Kirche«.
- 10 Paul Gräb, *Kunst und Kirche: Getrennte Wege – Gemeinsame Wege, tà katoptrizòmena: Magazin für Theologie und Ästhetik* 9 (2001), <https://www.theomag.de/09/pg1.htm> [accessed 1 April 2025].
- 11 Romano Guardini, *Über das Wesen des Kunstwerks*, Tübingen: Rainer Wunderlich Verlag, 1948, 36; in the original: »nicht nur ein Sehen oder Hören, wie bei den Gegenständen der Umgebung sonst; gar ein Genießen und Sich-Vergnügen, wie bei einer Erfreulichkeit. Das Kunstwerk öffnet vielmehr einen Raum, in welchen der Mensch eintreten, in dem er atmen, sich bewegen und mit den offen gewordenen Dingen und Menschen umgehen kann. Darum muß er sich aber bemühen – und damit wird, an diesem besonderen Punkt, jene Aufgabe deutlich, die für uns Heutige so dringlich ist, wie kaum eine sonst, nämlich die der Kontemplation.«

Even if Guardini does not think specifically about liturgical art, he points to the *possibility* of such openness for the aesthetic-artistic as an opportunity for contemplation. This term can be understood in a broad sense here that is not necessarily religious but denotes a desire to seek meaning and truth about oneself and one's own existence in the world, a quest which is usually absorbed by the demands of everyday life. This confirms what we said above with Larcher about the convergence of art and liturgy which both offer the occasion to disrupt the everyday in the search for meaning that leads to another level of existence.

Guardini speaks of an opening of the experience of being closed in oneself that normally characterizes existence, which is directly proportional to my capacity to abandon myself to the artwork. Withdrawing from the everyday in this way has not only the goal of easing the pressure of obligations and competition by permitting me to briefly catch my breath and take a break. More importantly, it allows me to develop an authentic relationship with myself: the human being who opens up a space for contemplation in the reception of an artwork and enters into it »gains a clearer understanding of themselves; not through theoretical reflection, but in the sense of an immediate elucidation. The heaviness of their own un-lived existence lessens. They become more deeply aware of the possibility of becoming themselves real, pure, fulfilled and fully formed.«<sup>12</sup>

Guardini carefully keeps his distance from the perhaps overly confident rhetoric of his time according to which art either is juxtaposed to the ›real-world because it evokes a totally different world, or it provides answers to our most existential questions which we are not able to find in turning to our world. In the 20th century, discourses on art underline, on the one hand, that artistic practice and its products are forms of the world and rooted in it, »all the way down to its filth«, as Daniel Sibony notes.<sup>13</sup> On the other hand, the deconstructive impetus and the playful-interactive attitude of contemporary artworks with whom recipients are invited to enter into a game of mutu-

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12 Guardini, *Über das Wesen des Kunstwerks*, 37–38; in the original: »wird sich selber deutlicher; nicht theoretisch reflektierend, sondern im Sinne unmittelbarer Aufhellung. Die Schwere des eigenen undurchlebten Vorhandenseins lichtet sich. Er wird tiefer der Möglichkeit inne, selbst echt, rein, erfüllt und ausgeformt zu werden.«

13 Daniel Sibony, *Création: Essai sur L'Art contemporain*, Paris: Seuil, 2005, 76; in the original: »jusqu'à l'immonde«.

al reflections rather than to explore an intrinsic meaning, contribute to our understanding that the existential ›answers‹ we hope to receive from art lie, to a certain degree, already within us so that the artwork evokes them in us rather than giving form to them. The openness of which Guardini speaks is thus not the passage into a different reality full of significance, leaving the world in its totality behind as meaningless, but it is rather the departure from that part of the world and our lives that are hardened by the necessities and obligations we carry, which, however, given the weight of the everyday, we are used to thinking of and living as the ›whole‹, as if this was all of reality. To be able to leave this oppressive narrowness and reach out towards insights about meaning and truth is grace: at least in the sense that we are not able to do so on our own and find our answers within ourselves but that we need other means that open up this passage for us, moments of disruption like an artwork – and like the liturgy with the buildings and objects that are created for its celebration.

#### 4. Representation and Presence

This recent rediscovery of the kinship between art and liturgy, understood as an opportunity to break down the barrier that everyday life erects around us and that limits our creative, spiritual potentialities, represents something new, perhaps even a rupture in the tradition of religious art. In the past, the Western theory of the image has always moved in a different register than liturgy, focusing especially on the image as representation.<sup>14</sup> Thus, with focus on its signifying function, the religious painting has traditionally been considered as a substitute for the word of God. Paintings, sculptures, and mosaics in churches were attributed a narrative, supportive function. While contemporary theories of the image have moved away from this emphasis on representation, there still remains a continuity between this communicative-didactic register which promotes the knowledge of and affective participation in the content of the faith, and the paradigm that Guardini has described as the opening up of a space of contemplation.<sup>15</sup> But the recognition of this

14 Pierangelo Sequeri, *Ritrattazioni del simbolico: Logica dell'essere-performativo e teologia*, Assisi: Cittadella, 2012, 40.

15 For example Pierre Piret, *L'Art et le Christianisme*, Bruxelles: Lessius, 2007.

continuity should not lead us to neglect the significance of these theoretical shifts which have encouraged specific attention to the different dimensions or qualities of communication that art initiates in the situation of reception. The current discussion situates this communication especially in the sensory or material dimension of an artwork, which in the past was often neglected in favor of the interpretation of its meaning.<sup>16</sup> In contrast to the classical paradigm of Western religious art according to which an artwork is primarily a representation, the contemporary aesthetic paradigm sees it primarily as *presence*, as we already discussed in earlier chapters.<sup>17</sup> If it is correct that the distinction between representation and presence (or in other terms, between signified and signifier, between *nomos* and *physis*, between artificial and authentic) is problematic when the terms are rigidly understood as polar opposites, then we need to clarify how else we might understand their connection, because it is decisive for the interpretation of the relationship between art and faith if it is to remain valid today.

In this endeavor, a return to historical experiences in which both paradigms are intuitively understood as collaborative can be helpful. This is the case, for example, in Abbot Suger's (1081–1151) account of his experience when contemplating the precious stones adorning the main altar of the Basilica of St. Denis. He writes: »When – out of my delight in the beauty of the house of God – the loveliness of the many-colored stones has called me away from external cares, and worthy meditation has induced me to reflect, transferring that which is material to that which is immaterial, on the diversity of the sacred virtues: then it seems to me that I see myself dwelling, as it were, in some strange region of the universe which neither exists entirely in the slime of the earth nor entirely in the purity of heaven.«<sup>18</sup> When Suger contemplates the cross of St. Eligius, covered in precious stones, the meaning of the cross as a religious symbol (which he does not even mention) is less important for his enjoyment – and the profoundness of the experience and reflec-

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16 This turn away from the material towards the immaterial meaning represented in it can be more than a vaguely Platonic instinct and become programmatic, for example in the case of the Nazarene movement which placed all emphasis on the content and consciously neglected the technical and material dimension; see Schwebel, *Die Kunst und das Christentum*, 79.

17 See for example Chapter 2 and 3 in this volume.

18 Sugerius, quoted in Erwin Panofsky, *Meaning in the Visual Arts: Papers in and on Art History*, Garden City: Doubleday, 1955, 129.

tions it motivates – than the light and splendor of the stones which move him affectively to the point that he is pulled beyond the dimension of the everyday with its worldly worries and concerns. Understandably, Suger's account has led Erwin Panofsky to describe this experience as a trance-like state.<sup>19</sup>

Suger tries to capture this state in terms of a religious experience with his reference to the image of the heavenly Jerusalem that Revelation 21,11 describes like this: »It has the glory of God and a radiance like a very rare jewel, like jasper, clear as crystal.« And yet, tellingly, Suger hesitates to directly compare the »strange region of the universe« into which he feels himself drawn in the contemplation of the altar with the purity of heaven. His hesitation suggests that the religious dimension is not identical with the sensory-aesthetic one since the former does not assimilate the latter totally to its own meaning. There remains a gap between the two which reminds us of the newly opened space of which Guardini speaks and which avoids the complete identification of their horizons of which Larcher warns. While Suger's intuition that the two dimensions are not completely identical does not lead him to logically distinguish between the symbolic communication of the religious image and its aesthetic affectivity, the problem is clearly raised given the sensory impression which is experienced as enchantment. To articulate these two levels of experience – the symbolic and the aesthetic – in the tension of their relatedness and distinction is the unavoidable task of the theological-aesthetic reflection on the meaning and role of liturgical art.

Contemporary art contributes to the reconsideration of the connection between the paradigms of representation and presence through the introduction of new and sometimes provocative ways of reinterpreting the traditional religious iconography. These artistic endeavors at transformation and challenge can function, as Larcher writes, as a »prophetic thorn«<sup>20</sup> provoking a »distorting recollection«<sup>21</sup> of the history of salvation as previously expressed in theology and in the liturgical art condoned by ecclesial authorities. The liturgical art commissioned by the church does not even have to actively distance itself from those qualitatively inferior images functioning in the mode of representation which are content to reproduce already assimilated forms of expression, because these artworks are already condemned

19 Panofsky, *Meaning in the Visual Arts*, 129.

20 Larcher, *Annäherungsversuche*, 78; in the original: »prophetische[r] Stachel«.

21 Larcher, *Annäherungsversuche*, 79; »verfremdende[] Erinnerung«.

by their own mediocrity. Couturier writes about a work created with concessions to pastoral or moral criteria external to it that »the work is disqualified after a few years and loses all its power whereas pure relations of colors and lines keep forever the miraculous power of purification, pacification, and exaltation which their authors had not even thought about.«<sup>22</sup> Liturgical art created within the framework provided by church authorities is already far from the idea of an image which might be able to focus the attention and faith of those who are in its presence, because it so closely corresponds to its model and reliably evokes that model through its codes.

The idolatrous tendency of this regulatory mechanism is obvious: when the correspondence of signs with meaning is rendered unambiguous by following traditional and easily recognizable iconographic conventions, one entrusts oneself to a regulated expressivity which does not allow for any surprises, such as the one of being taken into this strange region of the universe that Suger experienced. Even if such an image is aesthetically pleasing, it is still an image created in view of a goal (expressing or representing a certain predetermined idea) that is defined and governed by religion (an institution, its authorities, or its doctrines) without admitting a performative surplus beyond what has already been predetermined. This kind of art is thus unable to lead the recipients into the vertical dimension of divine presence which is – if we can discover it – always where we would not expect it: in the surprising, unnatural, or surreal. In the case of the non-idolatrous material image, presence shifts and oscillates continuously. The image does not »evoke« presence or its location, but it limits itself to trace its ruptured, contingent texture in the drama of liturgical action, in the flickering brilliance of a precious stone or, as we will see in a moment, in a pixelated stained glass window, a silk thread or a feather, that is, in the unexpected disruption of the forms of a kind of beauty that is simply docile, pleasing, and appeasing.

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22 Marie-Alain Couturier, *For the Eyes* [1950], in: Marie-Alain Couturier, *Sacred Art*, texts selected by Dominique de Menil and Pie Duployé, translated by Granger Ryan, Austin: University of Texas Press/Menil Foundation, 1989, 14–17, here 16.

## 5. A Dialogue with Art beyond Interpretation

Gerhard Richter's stained glass window in the Cathedral of Cologne can serve as an example of the inability of traditional religious iconography to create, today, the opportunity for the kind of contemplative seeing – seeing-into and seeing-beyond – that Suger describes, as well as of the impossibility of predicting the religious effect of an artwork – the presence it traces, momentarily and without permanence – in the liturgical space of a church. Faced with the necessity of replacing the windows of the southern transept installed after World War II, the Cathedral Chapter at first considered taking the traditional route and commissioning a work with an explicitly religious subject matter, such as figurative representations of martyrs of the 20th century, corresponding to the iconographic program of the other windows in the cathedral. The correspondence in content was thought to be legitimation enough for the insertion of a contemporary artwork into the centuries-old cathedral and, at the same time, a guarantee of the desired effect of the new window in the sacred space. But when the Chapter chose to commission Richter with the new window, things changed radically. Richter, a non-religious artist who is, however, deeply sensitive to the importance of faith in life and the profound effect of Christianity on European culture and art,<sup>23</sup> could »natürlich« (of course), as he says, not find a form for such a kind of representative work.<sup>24</sup> Instead, Richter left traditional form and content behind altogether and turned toward abstraction, inspired by his work *4096 Farben* (1974) which he used as a model for the window. The result is a window of pure color: small glass squares in 72 colors seamlessly put next to each other and arranged axis-symmetrically according to a computer-generated random pattern (fig. 1). The artist only changed minor details manually in order to avoid figurative associations or to fine-tune the color combinations. The effect is that of a sea of colors which seem to move, oscillate, and interact, and of the window not just providing light in the dark space of the cathedral but also giving it a new vitality (fig. 2).

23 Charlene Spretnak, *The Spiritual Dimension in Modern Art: Art History Reconsidered, 1800 to the Present*, New York: Palgrave, 2014, 134–135.

24 Gerhard Richter, quoted in Luca Di Blasi, *Da ist alles drin: Gerhard Richters riesiges Fenster für den Kölner Dom sieht aus wie ein Computerbild*, *Die Zeit*, no. 35, 23 August 2007, <http://www.zeit.de/2007/35/Fenster-Richter> [accessed 1 April 2025].

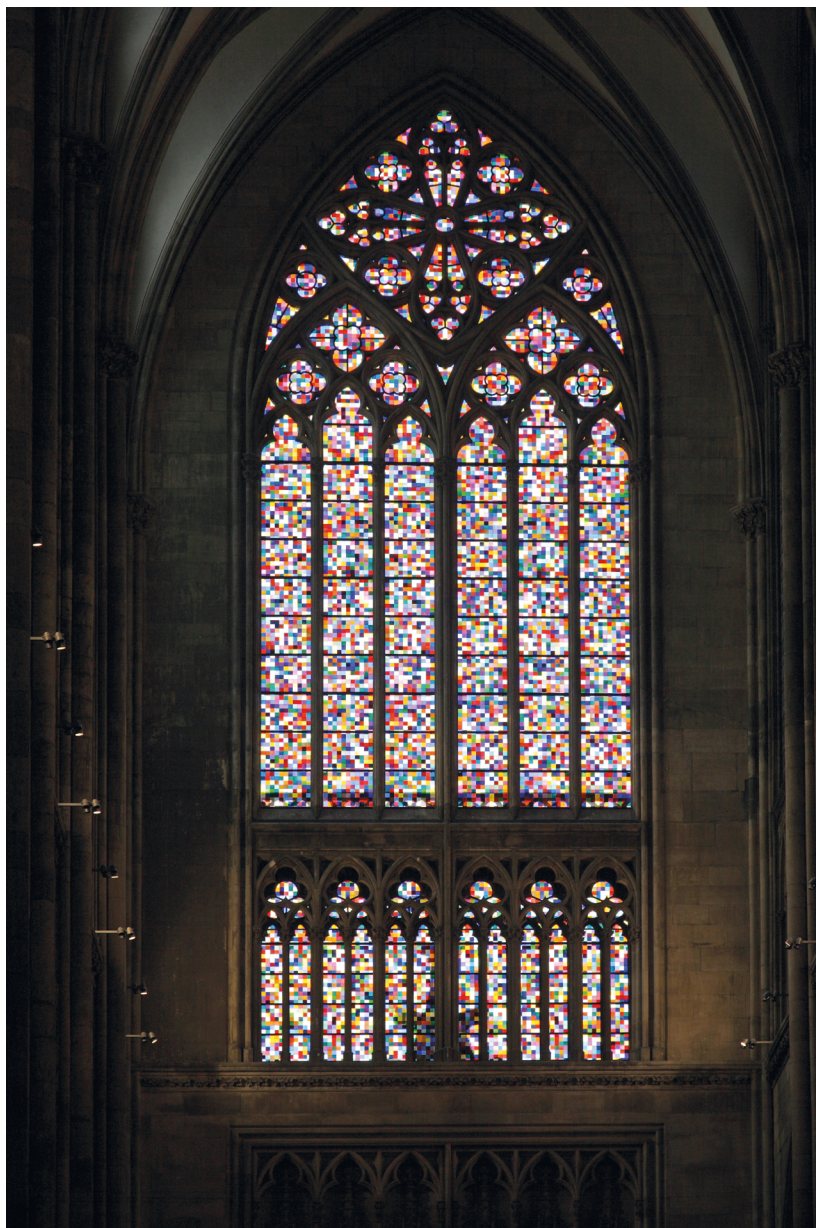


Fig. 1: Gerhard Richter, Cologne Cathedral Window (2007), stained glass, 2300 x 900 cm, southern transept of Cologne Cathedral. Photo by Florian Monheim. © Bildarchiv Monheim Baukunst.



Fig. 2: Reflections of the light shining through Richter's window in Cologne Cathedral.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Source: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Kölner\\_Dom\\_Richter\\_Fenster.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Kölner_Dom_Richter_Fenster.jpg), photo by Geolina13 [accessed 22 February 2026].

Over the course of the development and installation of Richter's window, a polemic developed that reflects the different approaches to liturgical art we have outlined above. The bishop of Cologne at the time, Cardinal Joachim Meisner, reacted critically to the challenge posed by the abstract artwork, of which Werner Spies writes that it is of a »self-confessed profanity [with which] contemporary art has not dared to enter the church for a hundred years«. <sup>26</sup> According to Meisner, the window is not able to express the distinct essence of Christian faith and thus could just as well have been installed in a mosque or any other place. <sup>27</sup> In his opinion, only figurative representations related to traditional iconography are able to give an artwork a Christian (even more specifically, Catholic) identity so that it can truly express the faith which is celebrated in the space where it will be installed. In spite of this critique, the concrete, sensory experience of the presence of the window with its colorful radiance in the cathedral and its reception by the faithful as well as tourists justify the Chapter's risky decision for Richter's window. And with time, even the Cardinal learned to appreciate the presence of the window. <sup>28</sup>

The example of Richter's window in Cologne shows that the conventional criteria for liturgical art (religious content, conventional form and iconography, religious identity of the artist) are not sufficient or, rather, that they have to be verified in the aesthetic experience and the reception of the artwork which define its legitimacy in correspondence to the space in which it is housed. Consequently, the numerous attempts at a symbolic interpretation of Richter's window are not able to fully exhaust its value for the liturgical space because they do not consider this experiential, sensory-spatial-material dimension. The window's similarity with an image made up of digital

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26 Werner Spies, Ein Ozean aus Glas im Kölner Dom, Frankfurter Allgemeine, 25 August 2007, <https://www.faz.net/aktuell/feuilleton/bilder-und-zeiten-1/gerhard-richters-fenster-ein-ozean-aus-glas-im-koelner-dom-1463774.html> [accessed 1 April 2025]; in the original: »bekennenden Profanität[, mit der] sich seit hundert Jahren keine zeitgenössische Kunst mehr in die Kirche getraut [hat]«.

27 Andreas Otto, Als Kardinal Meisner einen Wutausbruch bekam, *katholisch.de*, 21 August 2007, <https://www.katholisch.de/artikel/14454-als-kardinal-meisner-einen-wutausbruch-bekam> [accessed 3 April 2025].

28 Besuchermagnet in 72 Farben – Fünf Jahre Richter-Fenster, *Die Welt*, 22 August 2012, <http://www.welt.de/newsticker/news3/article108738302/Besuchermagnet-in-72-Farben-Fuenf-Jahre-Richter-Fenster.html> [accessed 1 April 2025].

pixels has been interpreted in relation to the apparently contemporary desire to live in a digital reality.<sup>29</sup> Others read the play of colors as a reference to Genesis and the multiple possibilities of creation,<sup>30</sup> the multi-colored light as divine light,<sup>31</sup> and the infinite interactions between the colors as a critique of »preferences and [...] exclusion«, as the »rejection of taste and dogmatism.«<sup>32</sup>

Such interpretations are certainly plausible to some degree given the cultural references which they associate and yet, though they may function on an academic level, so to say, they are not sufficient to establish the value of the artwork for and in the liturgical space. What counts in that particular space is the artwork's capacity to evoke an interior attitude and a renewed spiritual attention to the senses and their perception which can be found even in those whose interpretations focus on the window's symbolism when they speak of the glow and nearly aggressive effect of the colors.<sup>33</sup> Couturier also notes: »[w]e must insist that in art it is not the intellect that judges and discriminates, it is the senses – or, to put it more precisely, the intuition of the senses and not the exercise of reason. In matters of art one judges not by what one thinks but by what one feels. In other words, by what one is.«<sup>34</sup> The experience of the windows is one of seeing – and at the same time of the impossibility of seeing as we understand it in the context of everyday life, that is, as the seeing of *something*. The oscillating colors, impossible to grasp and fix, preclude objective and defining forms of seeing and result in a kind of subjective seeing that contemplates itself, or as Spies writes: »We see seeing.«<sup>35</sup> This kind of seeing is potentially open to the religious because it is freed from the instrumentalizing grasp of reality which focuses on the surface of what we see. Instead, contemplative seeing is a seeing into the depth of reality until, perhaps, we see the Other within and beyond it.

29 Di Blasi, Da ist alles drin.

30 Spies, Ozean, speaks of a »Parabel der Genesis« [parable of Genesis].

31 Werner Rügemer references this interpretation in his critical take on the Richter windows, *Göttliches Licht und kapitalistischer Realismus*, *Neue Rheinische Zeitung*, 19 September 2007, <http://www.nrhz.de/flyer/beitrag.php?id=11471&css=print> [accessed 3 April 2025].

32 Spies, Ozean; in the original: »Vorlieben und [...] Ausschluss«; »Ablehnung von Geschmack und Rechthaberei«

33 Spies, Ozean.

34 Couturier, *For the Eyes*, 14.

35 Spies, Ozean; in the original: »Wir sehen dem Sehen zu.«

This rupture of ordinary, objectifying, and functional seeing which opens a space for a new kind of seeing, a new and different seeing of ourselves and our world, is accompanied by a new perception of the space in which we find ourselves and of that which happens in it – the cathedral and the liturgy. For the window does not appear in a vacuum; we perceive it in a particular space and at a particular time. The architecture of the window and the cathedral, spatial relationships, the form and colors of the other windows, surfaces, lines, lights – all this influences perception and reception, just like weather conditions, the altitude of the sun, and the position of the viewer. This aesthetic experience of seeing, open for a religious dimension because it is another kind of seeing, perhaps even the seeing of the Other, is situated in specific spatio-temporal coordinates and thus unique, unrepeatable, and personal. And it could not be any different if the aesthetic experience is supposed to open a new space for the viewer. Thus, the experience is extremely subjective, yet not completely relative. For even if the window does not reference the tradition of religious art in form and content and does not represent the history of the Christian community in a narrative, didactic fashion and thus does not serve any extraneous purposes,<sup>36</sup> it is still a part of this history because of its situatedness in the space of the cathedral, and in the moment of our perception of the artwork in its autonomy, we as viewers – even if we enter the cathedral as tourists – also participate in this history, just as do other people who share this space with us and the community of all those who have entered the cathedral before us or will yet do so. The autonomy of the artwork is not violated through any kind of direct instrumentalization for the purposes of mission or teaching, but it relates to this particular liturgical space with its aesthetic, historical, and religious significance in the free mutuality of true friendship of which we talked above. In the case of the Richter window, it is therefore possible to speak with Luca di Blasi of an extraordinary proximity between art and church<sup>37</sup> in which neither of the two diminishes the value or autonomy of the other but enriches it with new possibilities – the aesthetic quality of faith, or the depth of seeing in the artwork, or whatever surprises the encounter with the window may hold for a viewer – that emerge from their mutual relationship.

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36 Schwebel, *Die Kunst und das Christentum*, 128.

37 Di Blasi, *Da ist alles drin*.

The Richter window is an example for the still relatively rare and risky case of an artwork that is not beholden to the criteria set by its commissioners or by the expectation to serve a purpose external to itself. As a permanent part of the liturgical space, it contributes to the creation of this space as sacred and to the actions performed there through the evocation of a particular atmosphere, attitude, and openness in the experience of a new kind of contemplative seeing. More frequent, and less problematic, is the temporary exhibition of an artwork in a church. The provisional character of the exhibition allows for greater freedom to experiment, even for calculated experiences of shock and irritation, because even if the community is not able to relate with the work, it just takes a bit of patience and everything will be as before. When exhibited temporarily, the work can also be integrated more intentionally into the liturgy and thus a more direct interaction between art and liturgy is possible that could not be sustained over a longer period of time without losing its effect.

An interesting example for such a temporary interaction between autonomous art and church is the intervention *W Erde Licht* by Elke Maier and Georg Planer in the Cathedral of Klagenfurt during Lent 2009. Nine female and male figures, sculpted by Georg Planer from soil, were positioned in the central aisle of the cathedral, lying on their back, arms along the body, legs closed and stretched long, reminding by their posture of the funerary sculptures of the Late Middle Ages. Using a multitude of fine threads, Elke Maier connected the figures with the cathedral ceiling which shows a representation of the risen Christ in its center (fig. 3). During the intervention, the figures were subject to natural changes, as the crumbly, unfired soil they were made from began to shift. But in conscious interaction with the liturgy of Lent and Holy Week, the artists added further transformations to the intervention: up until Palm Sunday, soil was added around and between the figures, and in the night from Holy Friday to Holy Saturday, this ›tomb‹ was covered in white marble sand. The resurrection of Easter Sunday was symbolized by a cloud of white feathers fastened on thin threads in the space above the figures (fig. 4).



Fig. 3: Elke Maier/Georg Planer, *W Erde Licht* (2009), very fine white silk yarn, white geese and duck feathers, white marble sand, soil, installation Klagenfurt Cathedral. Photo © F. Neumüller; artwork © Elke Maier & Georg Planer.



Fig. 4: Elke Maier/Georg Planer, *W Erde Licht* (2009) in its Easter transformation. Photo © F. Neumüller; artwork © Elke Maier & Georg Planer.

Different from Richter's window, the installation by Maier and Planer reacts directly to the liturgy of Lent and Holy Week, participating in it and adding a new concreteness and materiality to that which the liturgy remembers and celebrates: the death of Jesus Christ, the passing of the incarnated logos in his materiality (»You are dust, and to dust you shall return«, Gen 3,19), the darkness of Holy Saturday when all hope is extinguished and God appears absent – and then the legerity, life, and light of Easter Sunday. The dialectic of art vs. liturgy or images vs. text that so often strains the discussion about contemporary art in the church<sup>38</sup> is here resolved in a new perspective. Art does not claim to replace liturgy or kerygma but enters into a relationship with them and enriches them, while each retains its specificity. In the case of *W Erde Licht* (the title is a word play on »become light« and »soil – light«) this happens through emphasizing the anthropological dimension of the liturgy of Lent and Easter: the intervention relates to the event of the death and

38 See for example Schwebel, *Die Kunst*.

resurrection of Jesus Christ and interprets it so that it can be experienced by viewers through the reflection on the existential tension within the human being between the materiality of the body and the infinity of human desire, between earth and heaven, the fact of mortality and the hope of (eternal) life.

But as with the Richter window, the content and interpretation of Maier's and Planer's intervention cannot exhaust the work. Instead, it fully unfolds only in the experience of its aesthetic dimensions in which light and space play, again, a decisive role. Connected with the space of the church through the fine threads, the figures become a part of its architecture, iconographic program, and history, which the artwork both references and recreates. Similar to other interventions by Maier in Graz (2003), Innsbruck (2005) or Salzburg (2010), the threads are materially connected to the concrete space, yet also change it so that it can be perceived and experienced in a new way.<sup>39</sup> The contrast between the subtlety of the fine threads, the fragility of the feathers, the massive materiality of the cathedral, and the figures made from soil seems to undo space and materiality so that the figures float in space without losing their material groundedness. The work cannot be conclusively grasped in its totality because the light reflected on the threads changes and recreates it continuously, as do the transformation of the materials and the artists' conscious interventions. Although light and threads make each other visible in a certain sense, their visibility is momentary, indirect, and transitory. In fact, without light, the thin threads would be too fine to see, and without the threads as a reflective surface, light would be invisible. Thus the visible is also connected with the invisible, which can yet be experienced.<sup>40</sup> As in the contemplative seeing-of-seeing of Richter's windows, the seeing subject cannot fully grasp what they see and make it their own but, following the traces appearing among the changes, has to accept that what they believe they see is being withdrawn from their sight, again and again. Perhaps even more than in Richter's window, the kind of seeing solicited by Mai-

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39 This new vision of space is important for many interventions in churches. For a discussion of several examples see Johannes Rauchenberger/Alois Kölbl, *Locus Iste: Raum und Rührung*, in: Christian Wessely (ed.), *Kunst des Glaubens – Glaube der Kunst: Der Blick auf das ›unverfügbare Andere‹*, Regensburg: Pustet, 2006, 248–262.

40 This issue is important for the artist Elke Maier in other works as well; see Elisabeth Steiner, ›Ich bin eine Lebenssammlerin‹, *der Standard*, 2 September 2009, <http://diestandard.at/1250691841218/Ich-bin-eine-Lebenssammlerin> [accessed 1 April 2025].

er and Planer's work is not just subjective and contemplative but includes other senses as well: not only in the sense that meaning withdraws and the possible ›senses‹ of the installation multiply, but also in the sense that seeing the subtle threads, the rough soil, the fine marble dust, the weight of the figures, and the lightness of the feathers addresses also other senses and thus involves the viewer's whole sensory being in the process of meaning making. This attention to the synesthesia of perception can also help overcome the contrast between art (the sphere of the visible) and word (the sphere of the audible),<sup>41</sup> precisely because each of these spheres is not closed in itself and isolated but interacts with the other in making possible an experience that involves a person's total existence.

## 6. To Conclude: Opening the Space for Contemplative Seeing

Departing from a more general discussion about liturgical art and through the analysis of two specific examples, we propose a possibility of overcoming the deadlock in the discussion about liturgical art, which returns again and again to the same factors (the content of the work, the artist's faith, etc.), by focusing on its reception, and in particular the experiential dimension of reception, in the space of the church and the liturgy celebrated in it.<sup>42</sup> In 1965, Otto Stelzer wrote about the possibility of ›sacred‹ contemporary art: »The question is not what such creations *mean* but what they *effect*.«<sup>43</sup> This does not mean that form and content are unrelated and irrelevant, because they obviously have a decisive influence on reception. But it is more important to shift attention from the work and its creator to its reception in its spa-

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41 See e. g. Schwebel, *Die Kunst*, 221.

42 As Horst Schwebel notes, this requires closer theological reflection of perception and certainly also empirical studies of concrete reception experiences of artworks in the space of churches; Horst Schwebel, *Kunst im Kontext Kirche: Positionen – Anti-Positionen – Praktische Folgerungen, tà katoptrizòmena: Magazin für Theologie und Ästhetik* 46 (2007), <https://www.theomag.de/46/hs6.htm> [accessed 1 April 2025].

43 Otto Stelzer, *Kann moderne Kunst sakral sein?*, *Die Zeit*, 12 February 1965, <http://www.zeit.de/1965/07/kann-moderne-kunst-sakral-sein> [accessed 1 April 2025] (our emphasis); in the original: »Die Frage ist nicht, was solche Gestaltungen bedeuten, sondern was sie bewirken.«

tio-temporal context, the recipients and their background, and the ways in which the artwork is experienced. Such an experience cannot be planned; it is a gift, like a moment of grace when external conditions and internal attitudes coincide, when work and recipient enter into a play of interactions. A catalogue of objectifiable criteria for the evaluation of the relationship of a work to the space of the church cannot guarantee that such a moment of grace happens and that the work is able to enter into a relationship with the liturgical space of which it is a part, with the community that gathers there in order to celebrate their faith, and with those who, without confessing any faith, enter the church to find a moment of stillness or beauty. This web of multiple relationships between artwork and context has to be taken into account not only when someone tries to limit liturgical art to conventional content and form but also when someone attempts to introduce the challenging art of the avantgarde into the space of a church. This became clear when Georg Baselitz gave his *Tanz ums Kreuz* (1983), an inverted crucifix, to a small rural community,<sup>44</sup> where despite its undeniable quality as an artwork, the demanding, dominant work was – given the limited space and the needs of the celebrating community – unable to enter into a fruitful relationship with its context so that eventually it had to be removed and returned to the artist.

The decisive role of the context is also the reason why the reception of an artwork in the liturgical space can be so different from the reception experience in a museum: not everything is dependent on the viewer's subjectivity. Reception can and must be understood as an existential moment which integrates the whole person in past, present, and future by addressing all senses and the whole being of the individual. Yet it is not shaped by absolute subjectivity but by subjectivity-in-relation: in a mutually constitutive relation to the space of the church, to the actions performed there, the words spoken there, the faith that motivated its construction, and the history it has experienced, including the varying, even profane uses of the liturgical space. However, context is not defined by space only – important as it is – but also includes the community and the persons who have visited this space or will visit it, by what they believe, hope for, love, their doubts and discouragement. Their presence, movement, and practice co-create the space and thus

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44 Schwebel, *Die Kunst*, 191–192.

enter into the complex web of constitutive relationships which all shape the moment of reception and aesthetic experience. Even if contemporary liturgical art does not reproduce the forms and contents of the tradition, the artwork is still part of this tradition shaping Christian identity because of its relationship with space which it does not passively sustain simply because this is where it has been put but in whose creation it also participates. While Michel de Certeau has focused on movement and walking as a practice that constitutes spaces, which he contrasts with seeing as a totalizing practice,<sup>45</sup> the artworks discussed here as well as Suger's testimony also point towards the importance of seeing – understood and experienced as an unstable, precarious relationship or process, contemplative and not totalizing or instrumentalizing – in creating spaces of openness and freedom.

This brings us back once more to Guardini with whom it is possible to understand this aesthetic experience, which is not an alternative to the liturgy but in continuity and in a kind of kinship with it, as we said above, as the opening of a space of freedom.<sup>46</sup> The examples of Richter and Maier/Planer have contributed to qualifying this freedom as one of contemplative seeing, as Guardini said, and even more, one of indirect and uncertain seeing. In the splendor of Richter's window what is observed dissolves in the oscillating light of the small colored pixels, while Maier and Planer's work makes visible a double paradox: that of the heavy bodies floating in space and that of the thin threads and light which are invisible on their own and become visible only in their interaction. Without necessarily attributing a symbolic meaning to the light as divine light, the fact remains that in both cases, light makes seeing possible and yet at the same time impossible because it continuously changes what is seen. The experience of contemplative seeing which the works enable is characterized by instability and uncertainty and thus implies a tension towards the future – a future in which, as we hope, we will see clearly what now we only see darkly.

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45 See Marian Füssel's discussion of de Certeau's theory of space, *Tote Orte und gelebte Räume: Zur Raumtheorie von Michel de Certeau* S.J., *Historical Social Research* 38.3 (2013), 22–39, here 33–34.

46 This point is further developed in Chapter 7 of this volume.

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