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## Many-colored Glass

### Gerhard Richter and Sigmar Polke do windows.

by Peter Schjeldahl



Richter's window, left and center (detail), in the Cologne Cathedral, and a Polke stone window for the Grossmünster, in Zurich.

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By the lights of many in the international art world, Gerhard Richter and Sigmar Polke are the leading painters of our day, though it's hard to find anyone who will declare them equally great. (I'm an exception.) Their careers are intertwined by biography and circumstance. Both are from the former East Germany: Polke, who is sixty-seven, left with his family when he was twelve; Richter, seventy-six, fled, after fitful success in state-run art programs, in 1961, just before the Wall went up. They met at the seminal Düsseldorf Art Academy and, in 1963, collaborated in a brief, trenchant movement that responded to American Pop art with painted imagery drawn from magazine and newspaper ads and photographs, family snapshots, cheap fabric designs, and other desultory sources, which Richter adapted with deadpan gravity and Polke with sardonic élan. A jokey photographic print by Richter, from 1967, shows them sharing a bed in Antwerp. (Their host for a show there had provided scanty accommodations.) They ascended to prominence in the early nineteen-eighties—stunning American art circles, which had been largely oblivious of creative doings in Germany—as twin masters who dramatically expanded the resources and resonances of painting, an art dismissed as moribund by most of that time's avant-garde. Each has made visually glorious, conceptually seismic pictures. Both live and work in Cologne. But their differences are profound. Richter, reflective and deliberate, is a family man of temperate tastes and orderly habits. His studio is one of two elegant rectilinear buildings—the other is his house—in a large, walled, lushly gardened compound. Polke, restless and impulsive, is an unreconstructed bohemian, inhabiting cluttered expanses in a shabby industrial building. The question “Richter or Polke?” is a common icebreaker, and a self-revealing test, among art

students far beyond Germany. To embrace both is to incur a mental civil war, to be of two jealous minds, between incommensurable sensibilities. Temperamentally estranged—Richter’s decorum nettles Polke, whose effrontery exasperates Richter—the men have long been barely on speaking terms.

Their career trajectories have lately crossed again, at a peculiarly lofty nexus of art and society: commissions for stained-glass windows in prestigious churches. A vast window by Richter was installed last year in the south transept of the Cologne Cathedral, a Gothic bastion of Roman Catholicism in northern Europe, which was begun in 1248 and finally completed in 1880 (when it became, for four years, the world’s tallest building). It is the Germans’ favorite tourist attraction, according to a recent poll. In Switzerland, twelve windows by Polke—five big ones in glass and the rest, mostly small, in sliced translucent stone—will soon line the thousand-year-old Romanesque Grossmünster (large cathedral), the seat of Zurich’s cantonal state religion—the Evangelical-Reformed Church—and historically a cradle of the Protestant Reformation.

Neither artist is a believer. A German critic, Hubertus Butin, has termed Richter “a professed atheist with a strong leaning toward Catholicism”—a characterization that the artist condoned with a sly smile, when I saw him in Cologne. His three children with his third wife, Sabine Moritz, also a painter, were baptized in the cathedral, and two of them sing in the choir. The baptismal ceremonies “made me cry,” he told me. The erudite Polke is deeply versed in religious traditions. He said, “It’s not necessary to believe. Christianity for two thousand years has influenced the arts, architecture, philosophy, society.” Something of a serial monomaniac, Polke evangelizes for whatever interests him. An alchemical romance of elements enters into his choices of materials and pigments for his Zurich windows. My notes from our conversations bristle with mentions of cinnabar, alabaster, malachite, cobalt, lapis lazuli, and other precious stuffs, which he regards as poetic intensifications of the “mothering” substance—the *materia*—of the universe. His own spiritual bias is pantheistic. “I can accept the power of nature as religious,” he said. He conceives his stone windows as symbols of the creation, conjoining base matter and celestial light.

The Grossmünster was built as a Catholic church on the site of a fancy miracle: in the year 286, St. Felix, St. Regula, and St. Exuperantius, decapitated for clinging to their faith, picked up their heads and climbed to the top of a hill, where they dug graves and buried themselves. Charlemagne is supposed to have selected the spot for the church when his horse bowed down there. The Grossmünster was stripped of its altar and nearly all its decorations, under the Swiss reformer Huldrych Zwingli, in the sixteenth century. (Zwingli’s radicalism antagonized Martin Luther, and split the Reformation movement. Zwingli was killed in a war between Protestant and Catholic cantons, in 1531.) Disconcertingly, for such a fanatically denuded Protestant sanctuary, Polke’s glass designs—as previewed in computerized sketches, which, he cautioned me, may be subject to substantial changes—are brazenly pictorial, sporting garish images drawn from arcane historical sources. He showed me his inspirations in books from his huge studio library. The images loosely follow a thematic scheme of a type popular during the Middle Ages, which alludes to Old Testament anticipations of Jesus Christ.

One sketch, of a window in several panels, presents a wheeling purple shape, on a lavender ground, of eight identical cartoonish swordsmen (referring to the variously blade-wielding

Abraham, Charlemagne, and Zwingli); a ram (with reference to sacrifice and the Scapegoat) formed of what looks like spilled blood; and the severed heads of St. Felix and St. Regula being pulled from the earth by purple-sleeved hands. Another displays discontinuous bits of contour and fabric, in grays against a chartreuse ground, that add up to an apparitional figure of a harp-strumming King David. In a third, evoking Elijah's dream of Heaven, a pattern of multi-colored flagstonelike shapes surrounds what may be an angel who holds a large disk that seems to be embossed, in grays and pinks, with a semi-abstracted fiery chariot—the vehicle of the Greek god Helios, Polke explained. (This got him onto the subject of rounded forms in nature. He said, "God made the earth in small circles.") The incongruity of an iconophilic style in an iconoclastic church neatly balances the scheme that Richter introduced in Cologne: one of severe geometric abstraction in a color-chart-like grid, amid medieval illustrative glazing.

There promises to be little, if any, furor over Polke's windows in Zurich, where feelings about the official religion are tepid—in a canton of 1.25 million people, the Grossmünster, its liberal-minded senior minister, Kathi La Roche, told me, has only about eleven hundred congregants. And modern stained glass is amply preceded in the area: there are rather archly showy examples by Augusto Giacometti, a nephew of Alberto, in the Grossmünster, and by Marc Chagall, in the Fraumünster, a nearby church. But controversy lingers in Cologne, where, despite the public's acceptance, cynics have derided Richter's work as "pixels" and "confetti." More seriously, the city's archbishop, Cardinal Joachim Meisner, complained to a local newspaper that it "belongs equally in a mosque or another house of prayer," adding, "If we are going to have a new window, then it should be one that reflects our faith, not just any faith." He would seem to have a point, his doubtful reference to Islam aside. (Cologne has been roiled by plans to build a mosque for the city's hundred and twenty thousand Muslim residents, with minarets that would share the skyline with the cathedral's towers.) The window does feel ecumenical. Meisner, who was not consulted about the commission, found that he had an engagement in Poland on the day of the window's dedication. The literally paradoxical, if not quite heretical, results of these two projects pose a question of whether, in Christian Europe today, art on celebrated artists' terms has risen to equality with religion or if religion has sunk to the level of mere art.

When directly sunlit, Richter's south-facing window admits a wash of aureate illumination into the cathedral's gloomy immensity; at other times, it glows or shimmers. It is beautiful, grand, and entrancing, with the exfoliating specificities of a Bach fugue. Sixty-five feet tall, it consists of eleven thousand five hundred panes of "antique" handblown glass, made by forming a bubble into a cylinder, which, when cooled, is divided along its length. The glass is then reheated and flattened, giving it an uneven texture, with light-refracting ripples. Each more than a foot square, the panes of Richter's window are imperceptibly joined with silicon glue in six vertical panels and within multitudinous shapes of the crowning Gothic stone tracery. The work replaces an unsatisfactory modern piece, which had, in turn, replaced a nineteenth-century window shattered by Allied bombing during the Second World War. (The cathedral abuts Cologne's main railroad station, in an area that was blasted all but flat, and its substantial survival is a lasting wonder.) Richter had been asked for thematic imagery, perhaps memorializing one or both of two twentieth-century saints, Father Maximilian Kolbe and Sister Edith Stein, who died at the hands of the Nazis. He tried working from photographs of Nazi executions—shootings, hangings—but decided that the idea was grotesque. Certainly, it's not easy to conceive of the theme being expressed in fields of luminous color.

Richter says that he was about to abandon the project when he happened to lay a template of the window's frame on a reproduction of one of his many paintings of color grids. "I said, 'My God! Fantastic!'" he told a reporter. "I thought, This is the only thing." (Polke, in his studio, demonstrated the potency of medieval design for me by plopping a template of his Zurich windows—rounded, in the Romanesque manner, rather than peaked, in the Gothic—onto miscellaneous surfaces, including fabrics and floorboards. All became instantaneously holy.) Richter's chief model was his own huge painting "4096 Colors" (1974), in which each of a thousand and twenty-four sprayed-enamel colors, in a graduated spectrum of hues and tones, appears four times. It was composed by chance. (Chance is "more clever than I," he has said.) Richter likewise randomized the window's squares within sections that mirror one another at intervals, like the rhymes in a verse form. The result employs seventy-two colors that he deemed consistent with those of the cathedral's forty-three windows dating from 1260 to 1562 (which survived the war in storage), and close enough in tone to avoid spots of disrupting opacity and glare.

"It is loud, wet, and cold, but there is no other possibility for this." So saying, in a dusty factory in Zurich, the young, intense glass master Urs Rickenbach—one of about forty in Switzerland who hold the title—nudged a tiny slice of caramel-colored agate into a water-cooled, diamond-edged circular saw, his fingers nearly touching the blade. A shrieking minute later, the piece had an irregular scallop shape. On another floor of the plant, it was fit into an abstract mosaic of colored stones—some untrimmed and quite large, with cores of glittering crystallization and artificially enhanced reds, blues, and violets—which was laid out on a table, awaiting completion with strips of alloyed lead and tin, called comes, in the ancient way of stained glass. "This is Swiss precision!" Polke, looking on, announced with jocular satisfaction. Rickenbach exuded pride. He has limited opportunities to apply his skills to ecclesiastical glazing. The firm that he works for, founded in 1887 to produce and restore stained glass, now does most of its business in custom mirrors, tilework, and shower stalls. He showed me his well-worn hand tools, far older than he is, and small machines for cutting glass and extruding and soldering metal, and he demonstrated techniques of painting on glass. There will be a good deal of painted glass in the Grossmünster windows, on expanses where there are few dividing comes.

Laying a clear pane on a Polke drawing of teeming cherubs, Rickenbach swiftly traced the lines with a brush dipped in a solution of iron oxide. Mineral pigments melt into and fuse with the surface when baked at temperatures above eleven hundred degrees Fahrenheit. For the Zurich windows, an abundance of techniques will be employed, including the oldest: the mixing of metallic oxides—such as copper for ruby red, manganese for rose pink, and cobalt for blue—with molten glass. (That was the predominant practice until about 1300, when it was discovered that silver-nitrate solution brushed onto glass stained it yellow, giving the medium its name.) Others will be flashed-glass abrasion (clear panes fused with colored ones which are scraped away to various results), glass fusing (combining layers of different-colored glass), sandblasting, and a traditional procedure called *Schwarzlot*, the manipulation of black enamel with hand tools that yield delectable names in translation: expellers, draggers, pestles, quills. Polke, whose first job as a teen-ager in West Germany was in stained-glass restoration, enjoys making demands on

Rickenbach, who relishes the challenge. Having performed his painting demonstration, Rickenbach picked up a cloth and wiped the glass clean.

Stained glass is a confusing art form—if it is an art form, given that its effects blend, or vanish, into architectural functions of decoration and ornament. The older it is, the better it is, for the most part. Literary and archeological evidence dates the use of colored glass in churches to the early centuries of the Christian era. The first surviving whole examples are from the end of the eleventh century and the beginning of the twelfth, in Germany and France. The innovation of buttressed architecture enabled large windows by freeing walls from having to hold up their buildings' weight. The major theorist and first great patron of the development, Abbot Suger of St. Denis (1081-1151), promulgated a Neoplatonic doctrine: *lux continua*—the unbroken light. He distinguished among *lux* (daylight, which falls alike “on the evil and the good,” according to Matthew), *lumen* (the consecrated light that has entered sanctuaries), and illumination (of the soul, realizing a condition described in Ephesians: “Now you are light in the Lord, walk as children of light”). “Onward from the material to the immaterial,” Suger wrote. He justified the medium's sensuous allure as a foretaste of the New Jerusalem, which will be bejewelled, as he foresaw it, citing Revelation, with “jasper, sapphire, chalcedony, emerald, sardonyx, sardius, chrysolite, beryl, topaz, chrysophase, jacinth, amethyst.” The fragility of windows—subject to mishaps of war, neglect, accident, and foolish renovation, in addition to the long, catastrophic rampages of Protestant malice—insures that we know only a fraction of what was achieved during the era of the late Romanesque and the Gothic.

That classical period ended in the Renaissance, when the word “Gothic” was coined as a retrospective slur, connoting barbarism. The loss of Suger's theological passion trivialized stained glass: the flat and lapidary mosaic forms, with painted inflections, of medieval windows gave way to artisanal imitations of perspectival and realistic painting, becoming an essentially reproductive craft. (A similar reduction befell the formerly semi-independent art of tapestry, betraying its formal propriety with tricked-out illusions of deep space.) The unitary power of Gothic stained glass, in which figures and their surroundings share the picture plane, equalizing the impacts of side-by-side colors, has haunted glassmakers, and eluded emulation, ever since. Periodic revivals—notably in England in the nineteenth century, promoted by A. W. N. Pugin, John Ruskin, and the Pre-Raphaelites—have been longer on nostalgia than on persuasion, unless anti-modern reaction is a persuasive cause. Serene intensities of faith don't yield themselves to stylistic pastiche.

Despite certain tours de force by modern artists—the most graceful and gracious being Matisse's Vence Chapel, with its succinct linear motifs—stained glass now serves mainly as a practical and pretty expedient for places where daylight is wanted, but not a view, or where prettiness is an end in itself. There's no disgrace in that. Art Nouveau and Jugendstil designers concentrated on the visual pleasures of the medium using novel means, including Louis Comfort Tiffany's innovations in opalescent glass. (Those movements shared a *Zeitgeist* with Impressionism, which might be termed, at a stretch, stained glass on canvas: merging imagery with chromatic light.) In architecture by Frank Lloyd Wright, among many others, stained glass contributes a ceremonial dignity—an anodyne tincture of churchiness—to secular environments. I've seen designs for a promising new project, by the American minimalist painter Robert Mangold, to be installed in the complex of a new federal courthouse in Buffalo: augustly soaring windows, in arrays as high

as forty feet, in subtly denatured colors, engraved with laconic linear arabesques. The color will be applied as a baked-in layer of ground glass and pigment on one side of clear panes, executed by a prominent firm in Munich. (German expertise is the field's gold standard, by general consent. Polke acknowledged that his choice of a Swiss company for a Swiss commission was politic, adding that the ardent Rickenbach has given him no cause for regret.)

Stained-glass art, including that of Gothic masterworks, is hard to contemplate. It is hard even to see. Our eyesight is wired to make sense of light falling on objects, not shining through them. When presented with variably bright sources, we automatically select the brightest, consigning the rest to shadow. Effects of sun-ignited color swamp those of mosaic composition and depicted image. What do we actually absorb amid the singing marvels of Chartres Cathedral, to cite perhaps the finest of the Gothic survivors (a hundred and fifty-two wholly or partly twelfth- and thirteenth-century windows), or in the swimmy glory of the most extravagant, the thirteenth-century Sainte-Chapelle, in Paris? ("But that's kitschy!" Polke scoffed, when I mentioned Sainte-Chapelle.) My own keenest pleasure in stained glass occurs at first glance—a "Wow!" moment, like the here-and-gone dazzle of fireworks. To be sustained, the experience calls for an organizing idea, a ruling fiction, making disorientation meaningful.

Richter and Polke have addressed that need, in ways both hypermodern and attuned to Gothic wisdom. Richter's Cologne window delivers an incessant first impression. You are always just beginning to behold it, in a mental state that is at once unfocussed and undistracted. Persisting, you may sense slight changes in the day's light—tiny, barely registered visual thunderclaps. The experience interpenetrates with that of the cathedral's droning cavernousness (the air has a sound) to induce a mood that, if it isn't spiritual, has no name. The mind of a devout Catholic, thus voided of mundane reference, might well fill with Catholic sentiments. Of course, nothing prevents the respective blossoming of other dispositions—those of trespassers, in Cardinal Meisner's stoutly parochial view. But if Richter doesn't provide a hard answer to the mystery of religious longings, he certainly pries open the question.

As for Polke, count on him to pepper the conundrum with miscellaneous meanings. He has long been perhaps history's only mystically inclined Pop artist. (A 1969 painting bears the German words for "Higher powers command: Paint the upper right corner black"; the upper right corner is painted black.) His researches have included use of hallucinogenic drugs—"to be rational," he said—which coincided with a reduction in his output in the early seventies. (He recalled a spell of communal living in Zurich around that time.) "I am a popular artist for the daily life," Polke remarked, leaving me to envision a notion of daily life that is a good deal more intricate than the bare phrase suggests. His gaudy designs for Zurich may be a kind of travesty, but their impertinence stirs dormant roots of belief to aggravated consciousness. Richter always determinedly trips up the expectations of our settled tastes in art; Polke continuously embarrasses them. In either case, we are brought to a verge of things that we know we don't know—palpably actual and ineluctably veiled in the streaming light of day. ♦