

Vitreous Demeanor and Gerhard Richter's Moving Glass

Taisuke Edamura

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The body of Gerhard Richter's glass works accounts for only a fraction of his oeuvre, of which photo-based and brightly-coloured abstract paintings constitute a substantial portion. Nonetheless, critics have treated the artist's glass works as no less significant than those paintings due to their intended critique of the traditions of picture making. A pane of glass never creates an illusionary space as it never calls for any mathematical formula for making a fully perspectival view of the phenomenal world. The absence of painted objects subverts the demarcation between "seeing" and "being seen," enabling the pane to function as a site in which these two contrary modes of perception become interchangeable. In this sense, Richter's glass works, as well as his paintings, can be seen as a sterling constituent of a thematic consistency in the trajectory of his critique of conventional picture making.

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However, this understanding is not always sufficient to articulate the specificity of the glass works. The works can be illuminated through not only their critical relations to painting, but also their striking material presence highlighted by their distinctive movement or "vitreous demeanor": panes of glass rotating on vertical axes, changing angles, and intruding into the space of beholding. On the one hand, the mobility of glass panes reflects the forced motionlessness within the conventional perspectival ties between seers and the depicted, generating more than a single image by turning the panes. On the other hand, this articulation could indicate a precarious situation in which a pane of glass readily identifies itself with—or critically refers to—a painting, in general, and Leon Battista Alberti's all-too-famous metaphor of the window, in particular. Indeed, the connection between Alberti's window and Richter's glass works has been put forth by such critics as Dietmar Elger, Hubertus Butin, and Armin Zweite. This mobility marks the limits of defining the specificity of the glass works in both pictorial and visual terms. Accordingly, what will be examined in this paper is not an object to be discussed as an exclusive revision of the history of painting, but a defiant some-thing that experiences discomfort with such a discussion.

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Let us start with the first installation piece using glass. In 1967, Richter presented *Four Panes of Glass* (fig. 1) consisting of four large glass panels set in steel frames; the panels are juxtaposed to each other and bolted to iron rods anchored to ceiling and floor, enabling it to rotate around a central axis and provide viewers with a range of angles. Benjamin H. D. Buchloh sees *Four Panes of Glass* as a critique of "the new mystification of painting . . . by means of the object itself."¹ He states: "The piece refers to nothing beyond itself and its own concrete and material objectivity, thereby directing spectators' attention back on to themselves."² Here the old conception of painting as "retinal art" must be deprived of its meaning and significance. For the work provides no perceivable image, due to its visual transparency, but an ambiguous reflection of those who are looking at the panes in an effort to witness that which the work shall reveal. While each pane's rectangular frame directly refers to the framed painting through which the viewers meet the painted reality, it is no longer a spectacular aperture that leads their eyes toward a scene of real life. Richter seems to demonstrate a critical consciousness to the ever-pervasive representational style lasting from the age of the Renaissance—seeing the world outside from a window—through the radical purification of the work's non-representational aspects.

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The question here is not the relationship between *Four Panes of Glass* and the metaphor of the window per se, but the belief that the metaphor serves as an opening through which the world is seen. As mentioned earlier, critics have often described Richter's glass works as challenging "the window-view as the determinant of the realism of representation."³ In Dietmar Elger's words, *Four*



Fig. 1. Gerhard Richter. *Four Panes of Glass* [Vier Glasscheiben], glass and iron, 1967. CR160, Collection Anton Herbert.

Panes of Glass is the embodiment of Richter's indifference to "the epistemological quality of the picture which is a painted analogy to reality."⁴ While numerous art historians treat Alberti's window as such, the theory of perspective developed in Alberti's *De Pictura* did not excessively concern the visual status of what was represented: photographic realism in today's sense. According to Anne Friedberg, the metaphor was less about a painting to be seen in an unrestrained manner as when one appreciates the beautiful scenery viewed from the window. Friedberg writes: "Alberti's metaphoric 'window' was a framing device for the geometrics of his perspective formula. While it implied a fixed position for the viewer of single point perspective, it did not assume or imply that the 'subject to be painted' should be the exact view of what one would see out of an architectural window onto the natural world, as in a 'window on the world.'"⁵

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The window metaphor did concretize the fixed link between the viewer and a represented object in a rational manner. It was

not necessarily a gospel for every painter aiming at the exact depiction of the outside world. However, what is of interest here is not to obtain a correct understanding of the metaphor. Although the critics seem to prefer addressing "the window-view as determinant of the realism of representation" in their accounts of Richter's glass works, this does not mean that they disregard Alberti's true intent. Friedberg's reassessment of the window metaphor is more suggestive than innovative. It points out that the critics literally follow the Renaissance perspective that can only be described by the "authentic" window metaphor: a firm, restricted, and immovable association between the viewer/the critics and the object/the paintingness of the glass works. The glass works can be an invisible screen: the given intersection of the visual pyramid made up of the critics' eye (the apex) and the world of painting (the base). For that matter, the screen even suggests that the enticing rationality endowed with such a perspectival relationship is nothing more than illusory, just as is the case with Alberti's perspectival theory. It is the illusion that the glass works can be fully explained by taking painting into account as a historical, cultural, and institutional framework.

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Since the production of *Four Panes of Glass*, Richter has explored the variability and dispersiveness of glass and other allied materials. Indeed, the references to "glass" in this paper refer to both works of transparent glass and mirror works, including Richter's 1986 *Mirror* and the works of reflective glass panes painted gray or blood-red on one side; the edition of a heavy flint glass prism encased in a dark gray cardboard box, created for the exhibition *Gerhard Richter: Eight Gray* at Deutsche Guggenheim in Berlin; and the large stained glass for the South Transept window of the Cologne Cathedral, whose kaleidoscopic design reminds us of Richter's early abstract painting *4096 Colours* of 1974. Moreover, even his series of seascapes produced at the turn of the 1970s are relevant to these glass works; in particular *Seascape (Sea-Sea)* of 1970, which depicts the heavy sea replacing the sky through the upside-down image of the surface of the sea (as taken from another source), provides viewers with striking perceptual complexity as other glass works do, creating a baffling reflection in which the sea meets "another self." In this direction, Richter has tried to demonstrate the modes of visual experience ranging from transparency to reflection, using less artistic media such as glass, mirrors, and prisms, while disturbing our ordinary perceptions of the world and ourselves, raising penetrating questions over the conventionality of spectatorship in visual arts.

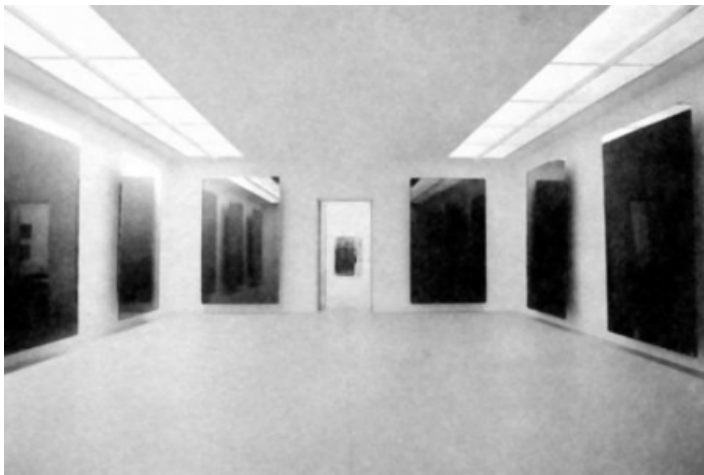


Fig. 2. Gerhard Richter, *Eight Grey [Acht Grau]*, gray enamel, glass and steel, 2001. CR874/1-8. 21st Century Museum of Contemporary Art, Kanazawa.

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Given the extent of Richter's glass works, it is little surprise that several critiques have emerged which focus on the artist's exhaustive investigation of the varied visual and perceptual models. Few attempts, however, have been made to consider this wide spectrum of the glass works by looking at their movement. Granted, a diversity of visibility characterizes the body of Richter's glass works, and the majority of critiques have focused on the demarcation between seeing and being seen, as well as its perspectival traditions. For this reason, however, such remarks have been often preoccupied with the notion of seeing, the history of painting, and their close relationality. In other words, the glass works have been understood and situated within the vast output of Richter's paintings because glass incessantly refers to Alberti's window—the immaterial specificity of the material of glass.

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In contrast, movement as another theme of the glass works has received considerably less attention. Although critics have discussed the conspicuous mobility of *Four Panes of Glass* or of *Eight Gray* (2002, fig. 2), it has been often characterized, again, as each work's critical attitude toward "the hieratic and traditional order of perspectival vision" that programmatically regulates the mutual relationship among a piece of art, viewers, and the space.⁶ More specifically, the critics agree that the mobility of the glass works provides the viewers with "an active part of play."⁷ Thus, Buchloh acknowledges the variability of each pane's angle in *Eight Gray* as a critique of "an ever-expanding regime of exhibition value and its associated spaces and objects."⁸ He admits the "creative subversiveness"

in the viewers' role in the work's mobility entails "a perceptual-perspectival disorder."⁹ Hubertus Butin concurs, recognizing that Richter bestows upon the viewers an ability to create a picture through the mobility of glass panes. He writes: "The mobility of the panes of glass was intended to give the viewer the opportunity to 'make a picture' in the truest sense, by positioning the frames and thus determining the excerpts of space the picture would present. The 'production' of the picture is thus left to the recipient: by varying the position of the frames, the angle of view, and the situation in the space, the work offers an inexhaustible abundance of possible pictures."¹⁰

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However, for those who insist on the generative aspects of the movement of the glass works, the viewers no longer serve as obedient constituents of the institutionalized perspectival representation; rather, they make an immediate break with the dominant "mono-scenic" representation by reaping "an inexhaustible abundance of possible pictures." Nonetheless, the mobility of the panes suggested here falls short of the innate subjectivity of the glass works which has little to do with the critics' intention to free the possibility of picture making from the traditions of perspective. Indeed, the movement of the glass works is not only for the exclusive "protagonization" of the viewers, but also for the works themselves as they resist being an obedient viewed object which is amenable to the viewers' manipulation.

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In 1977, a decade after the production of his first glass work, Richter returned to his interest in material with a unique sculptural installation, *Pane of Glass* (fig. 3). As the work was produced right after Richter stopped making gray paintings, it has been considered as a derivative of the motif of gray cast on a surface of glass.¹¹ The painted side of *Pane of Glass* is reminiscent of gray paintings, representing the remedial "nothingness" of the colour of gray; the other side of the work then serves as a mirror in which viewers see either themselves or other views of the exhibition space. In fact, gray glass not only suggests the artist's indifference to represented reality, but also offers a reflection of the viewers who grasp nothing. *Pane of Glass* contributed to the deepening of the role of gray in combination with glass, allowing us to see it as both a successor of the gray paintings and a forerunner of the glass works from the 1990s to the present.¹²



Fig. 3. Gerhard Richter, *Pane of Glass* [Glasscheibe], glass, iron, painted in gray on one side, 1977. CR415/1-2.

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The movement found in *Pane of Glass* is a definitive detachment from the wall, from which paintings have rarely been able to break. Unlike *Four Panes of Glass*—which allows each pane to rotate freely on its own horizontal axis—the work seems to be static and inactive, showing no great difference from minimalistic objects produced in the same period. It merely appears to be separated from the wall and forced—by Richter or curators—to stand in the exhibition space so that viewers can approach it from various angles. However, whether the movement is literally autonomous or not is of little significance. Rather, the focus should be on two simple facts: the work keeps its distance from the wall and the distance could never be made without the act of moving the work away from the wall. Although this view assumes that the work could be hung on the wall as if it is a painting, what really matters is that this movement away from the wall comprises the essential component of *Pane of Glass*.

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If the movement of the glass works is not for the fluctuation of “the hieratic and traditional orders of perspectival vision” or for the granting of “an active part of play” to the viewers, for what or whom should it be? Or, if it is pertinent to say that some movement is fundamental for a being to which it belongs, how can we assess the movement of the works and its diversity? In light of this interest, the movement of *Pane of Glass*—that is, its “being released from the wall”—can be viewed as the work’s encroachment on the viewers’ territory as such movement enables us to see the work as more of a vital thing than a static viewed object destined to put up with the inexorable gaze of the viewers. Expressed in a way that responds to concerns over the perceptual specificity of the glass works, the painted side of *Pane of Glass* refuses to be seen as a conventional pictorial surface by showing nothing attractable, whereas the other side of the work reflects upon its smooth gray surface the puzzled faces of its viewers. The fruitfulness of *Pane of Glass* can be attested to not only through “an inexhaustible abundance of possible pictures,” but also through a series of distinctive perplexities consisting of the foray into the domain of the viewers, the giving of anxiety called “the absence of representation” for them, and the capturing, or enjoyment, of their bemused expressions.

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If it is pertinent to understand the movement of *Pane of Glass* as resistance to the legitimated site of aesthetic experience, the subtle movement of *Eight Gray* can also be seen as a form of the struggle to avoid objectification by the viewers. Granted, unlike *Pane of Glass*—with its two metal legs—the eight “footless” panels of *Eight Gray* are fastened to the wall, and are thus not allowed to intrude into the space occupied by the viewers. Although the angles of the panels are manipulated mainly by Richter and curators, the viewers might be allowed to tilt them.¹³² Should this be the case, it is possible to give glory to the viewers as well as *Four Panes of Glass*. However, the sign of resistance presented by *Eight Gray* is as intimidating as what *Pane of Glass* demonstrates, while also being even more perceptual and encompassing. In most—if not all—cases, the eight glass panels are evenly spaced and mounted on the walls as if to encircle the exhibition space. The panels’ reflective quality enables them to monitor the people going in and out of the room in which they are displayed, projecting their every move onto the clear surfaces. Indeed, the panels are not only being seen by the viewers, but are also looking at them. What acts as the eyes of the panels are the countless

number of reflected viewers' eyes; the act of seeing on the part of the eight panes of glass comes into being by taking over or possessing the viewers' experience of being looked at through their reflections and returning their gazes. In addition to the recalcitrant *Pane of Glass* audaciously standing in the middle of the exhibition space, the movement of *Eight Gray* thus challenges the objectification of the glass works, colluding with the protagonized viewers.

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On the level of perception, Richter's glass works refuse the viewers through the absence of representation to which they are accustomed. On the level of movement, however, they liberate the viewers from the conventional logic of perspectival painting that requires a fixed relationship between seers and painted objects, enabling them to choose their perceptual relationship to the glass panes. This clear-cut contrast between the perceptual radicality and the liberatory movement notwithstanding, the mobility of the glass works is not only for the exclusive protagonization of the viewers. In *Pane of Glass*, the work's "being released from the wall"—which has been understood as a critique of conventional exhibition value—can also be seen as a subjective expression of the intrusion into the field assigned to those who appreciate the work. In the same way, *Eight Gray* becomes an animated looker, observing those who gaze at it. In a manner of speaking, each work's mobility—which is neither forcibly given nor completely self-motivated—can generate a "blur" that obscures the very definition of these glass works. The effect of this blurring enables one to propose various forms of interpretation in order to seek a clear image of the works. The movement becomes tantamount to the inevitability of our recognition of an afterimage that cannot be defined by any perceptual or historical elucidation; the ungraspable "afterimage" makes up, as it were, the gist of Richter's moving glass works.

(Endnotes)

¹ Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, "Readymade, Photography, and Painting in the Painting of Gerhard Richter," in *Neo-Avant-garde and Culture Industry: Essays on European and American Art from 1955 to 1975* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000): 373. The essay was originally published in *Gerhard Richter*, ed. Daniel Abadie, 11-58 (Paris: Musée National d'Art Moderne, 1977).

² Ibid., 373

³ Anne Friedberg, *The Virtual Window: From Alberti to Microsoft* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006): 33.

⁴ Dietmar Elger, "Landscape as a Model" in *Gerhard Richter: Landscapes* (Ostfildern-Ruit: Cantz, 1998), 16-18; emphasis is added.

⁵ Friedberg, 35.

⁶ Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, "Gerhard Richter's *Eight Gray*: Between *Vorschein* and *Glanz*" in *Gerhard Richter: Eight Gray* (Berlin: Deutsche Guggenheim Berlin, 2002): 27.

⁷ Armin Zweite, "Seeing, Reflecting, Appealing: Thoughts on the Work of Gerhard Richter" in *Gerhard Richter: Catalogue Raisonné, 1993-2004* (Düsseldorf: Richter Verlag, 2005): 60.

⁸ Buchloh, "Eight Gray," 28.

⁹ Ibid., 27.

¹⁰ Hubertus Butin, "Gerhard Richter and the Reflection on Images" in *Gerhard Richter: Editions, 1965-2004*, ed., Hubertus Butin and Stefan Gronert (Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz, 2004): 19. In the same way, Julia Gelshorn also highlights that the installation "demands that the observer account[s] for what can be seen." She writes: "*Four Panes of Glass* provides only the basic conditions for the perception of an image. It is up to the spectator to create a view by turning the panels and choosing the detail." Julia Gelshorn, "From Flatness to Space and Back Again: Concepts of Representation in the Work of Gerhard Richter and Sigmar Polke" *RACAR XXXI*, no. 1-2 (2006): 40.

¹¹ See Zweite, 59-60.

¹² Ibid., 60.

¹³ Buchloh "Eight Gray," 27.