The New York Times Style Magazine

art and soul

HOLIDAY 2007

The actress Natalie Portman

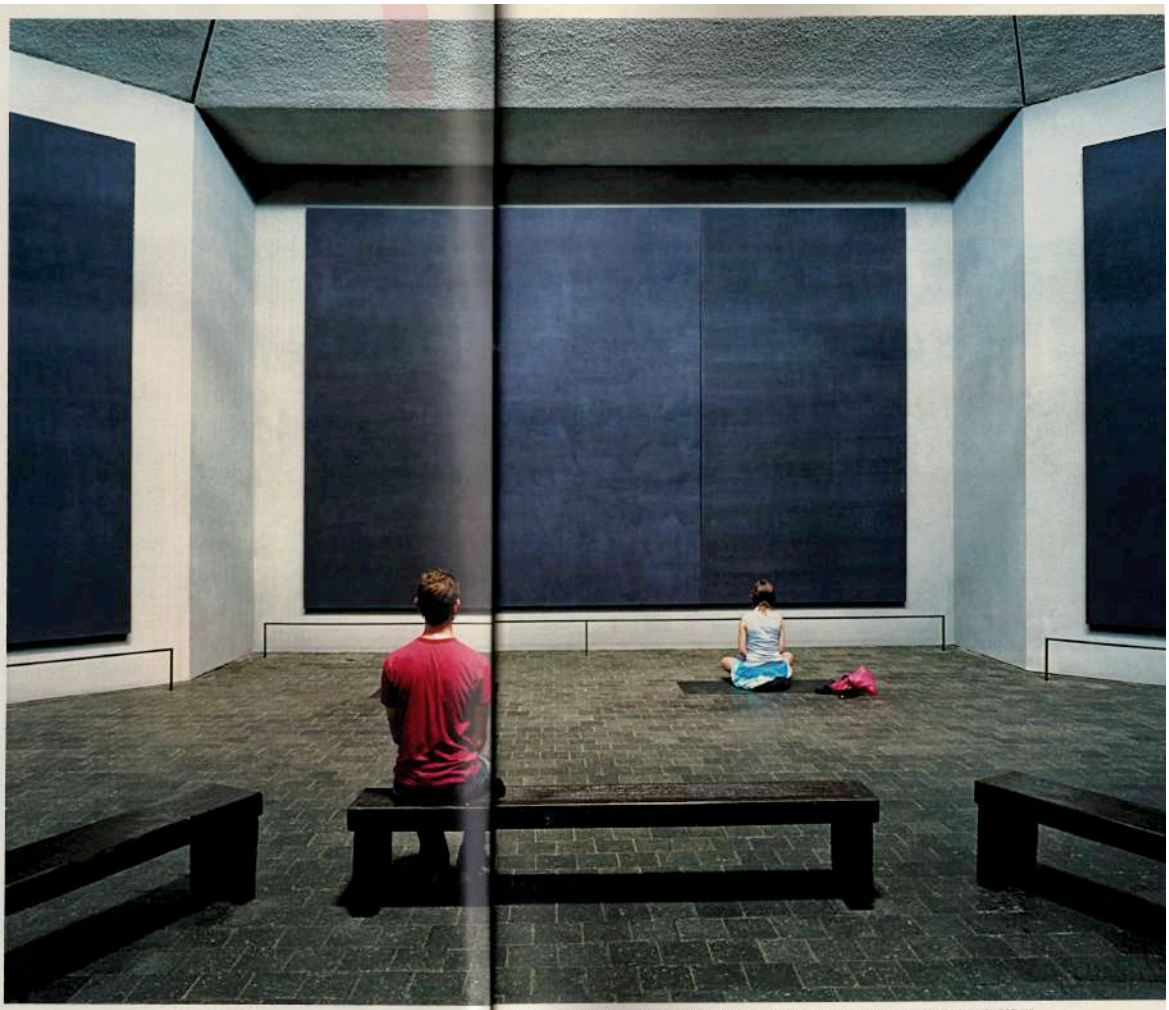
LET THERE BE ART

HOUSES OF WORSHIP WHERE THE FEELINGS OF EXALTATION COME FROM THE LIGHT.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY THOMAS STRUTH
TEXT BY MICHAEL KIMMELMAN

The earliest artworks originated in the service of a ritual — first the magical, then the religious kind," the philosopher Walter Benjamin wrote in the 1930s. Western culture changed, as Benjamin put it, when "the secular cult of beauty" developed during the Renaissance. Once liberated from its religious function, art gradually became its own theology — "a negative theology in the form of the idea of 'pure' art," Benjamin believed.

No doubt Modernism's "negative theology," or some such thing, is what irked the Archbishop of Cologne, Joachim Meisner, when not long ago he unburdened



Contemplating the abyss THE DE MENILS' NONDENOMINATIONAL CHAPEL IN HOUSTON, WITH PAINTINGS BY MARK ROTHKO.

Sinners and saints THE SCROVEGNI CHAPEL IN PADUA, ITALY. GIOTTO COMPLETED THE FRESCOES IN 1305.

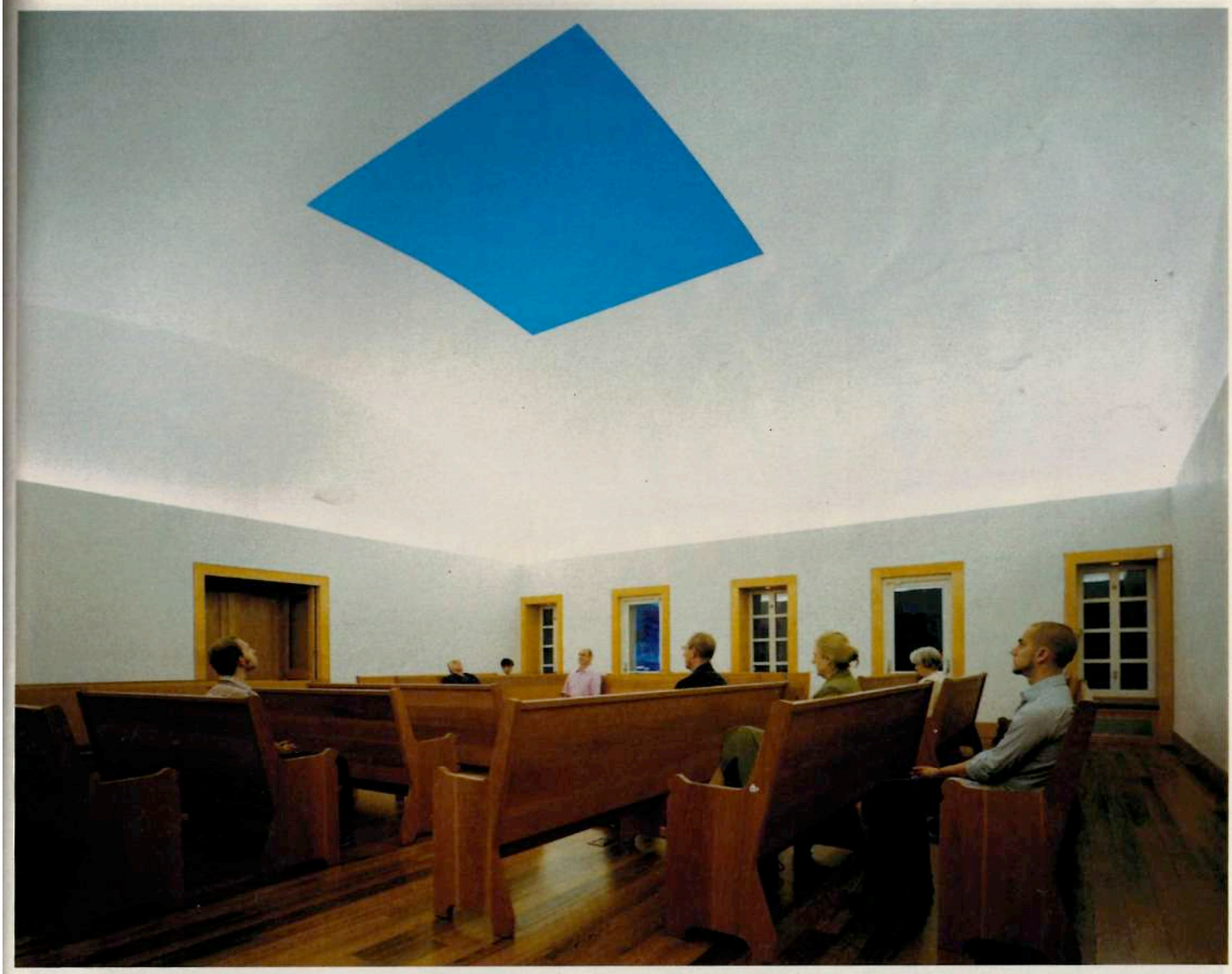
himself of the unnecessary opinion that the artist Gerhard Richter's new stained-glass window in the south transept of the great Cologne Cathedral — thousands of colored panes in dizzying checkerboard patterns — lacked the requisite pictures of saints and martyrs. "Where culture is estranged from worship," the archbishop announced, "the cult stagnates into ritualism, and culture degenerates."

Shame and scandal: "Degenerate culture" is just shy of "Heil Hitler" on the list of taboo phrases in Germany. The archbishop apologized, although nobody really believed he didn't know what he was saying.

Like the rest of us, he might wish to consider the photographs on these pages, shot for T by the artist Thomas Struth. In these pictures of Richter's work at the cathedral and of other silent sites of worship — temples of modern art, mostly — it's not the scenes of saints and martyrs that necessarily stir elevated feelings.

The light does. It's the common motif, whether it's glowing through Richter's hand-blown glass (in 72 colors arranged not by God, man or fate but by a computer) or coming through the windows of the Scrovegni Chapel in Padua, Italy. There, Giotto, calculating how much light was let in on one side of the building and not the other, used the sun to breathe life into his paintings. He also used it as a metaphor for enlightenment, naturally.

Enrico Scrovegni, who commissioned Giotto, was a wealthy banker. It's said he had the chapel built, next to his family *palazzo*, because he wanted to atone for the sins of his father, Reginaldo degli Scrovegni, apparently an appalling swindler whom Dante described in the seventh circle of hell. Struth, photographing the chapel half darkened (roughly as Giotto would have known it, before electric lamps were installed for millions of paying tourists), captures something of the room's original sense of mystery, on which all true worship depends — mystery expressed as a kind of incorporeal radiance. Using light almost sculpturally in this way is of course what any



A friend indeed THE LIVE OAK FRIENDS MEETING HOUSE IN HOUSTON, WITH A SKYSPACE BY THE ARTIST JAMES TURRELL, WHO IS A QUAKER.

good artist would do, but only great ones have the sophistication of Giotto, or of Matisse at the Chapel of the Rosary in Vence in the south of France.

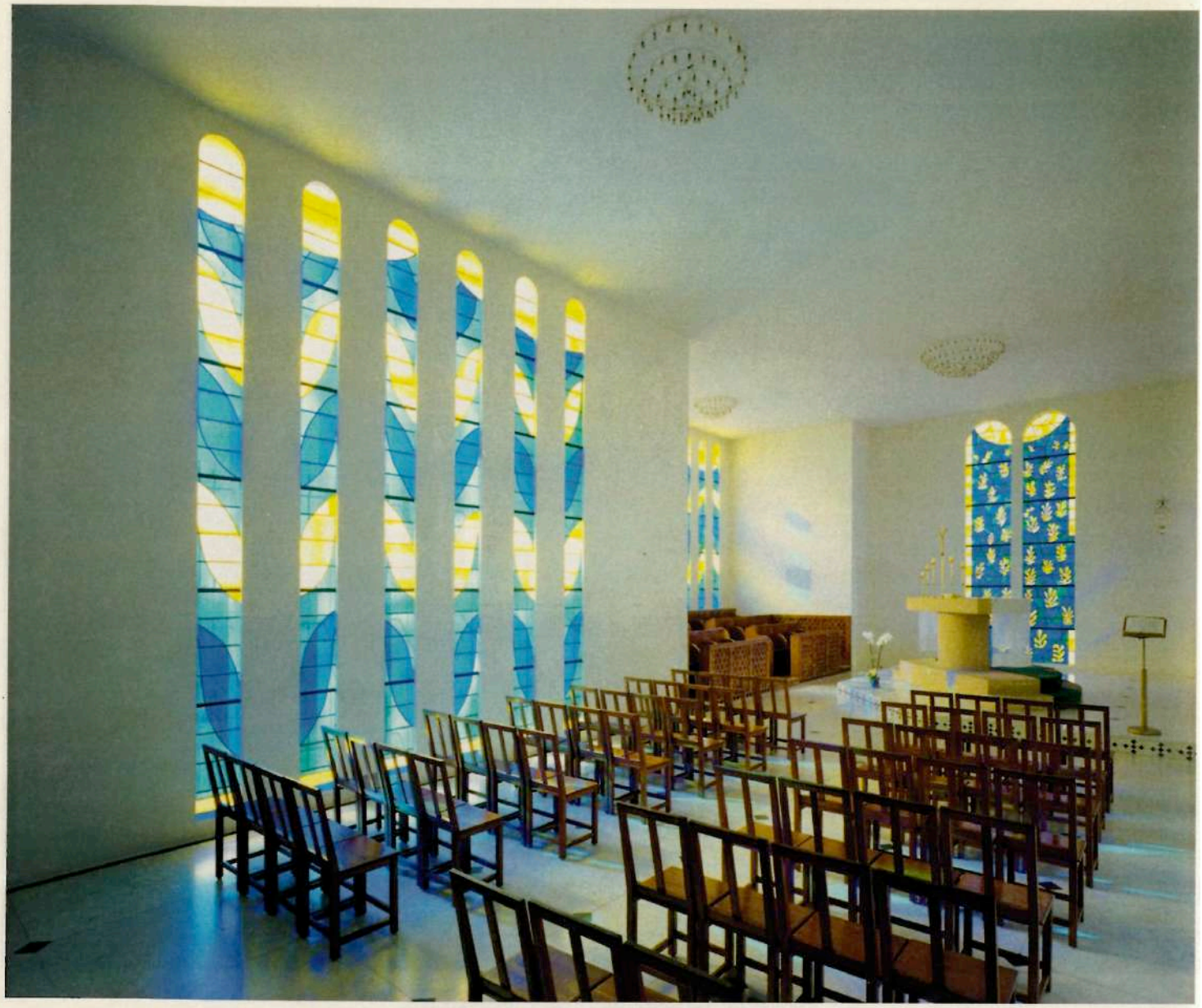
Matisse designed his chapel space so that, as the high Mediterranean sun moved across the sky, the windows — gold, green and blue, representing sun, nature and heaven — cast patterns on the murals of Saint Dominique, the Virgin Mary and Child, and the Stations of the Cross.

"In spite of all its imperfections," he once said, "I consider it my masterpiece." And maybe it is. Small and unremarkable from the outside, it's a universe unto itself once you're inside. Its spirituality and modern eloquence inspired Dominique and John de Menil, the art patrons from Houston, to commission their own chapel, a nondenominational one, with paintings by Mark Rothko, which Struth has also photographed.

Here the use of light, interestingly, is reversed: Looking at Rothko's suite of very dark paintings, somber rectangles of shaded charcoal, plum or maroon, requires a level of concentration akin to making out shapes in the dark. It's a struggle to discern what remains just out of our grasp — another metaphor of sorts, you might say, for the religious endeavor, to which a person can choose to surrender in the name of faith.

"Sure, you surrender," the artist James Turrell once said about adjusting to the faint light in his own mystical spaces. "My spaces are dim because low light opens the pupil, and then feeling comes out of the eye as touch, a sensuous act." He compared the act of surrender in a chapel to what happens to a person when they surrender to the doctor. "Only we're talking about healing the soul. If you think of all the cathedrals and sacred places in the world, there aren't many that don't involve light as a spiritual element," he continued. "We also have a physical relationship to light — we drink it as vitamin D. Our health has to do with light. Psychologically, light is important."

It's not coincidental that many spiritual experiences, including near-death ones, are described in terms of light, he added. "Go inside and greet the light," Turrell was told by his Quaker grandmother, which may or may not be what caused him to make a career out of light



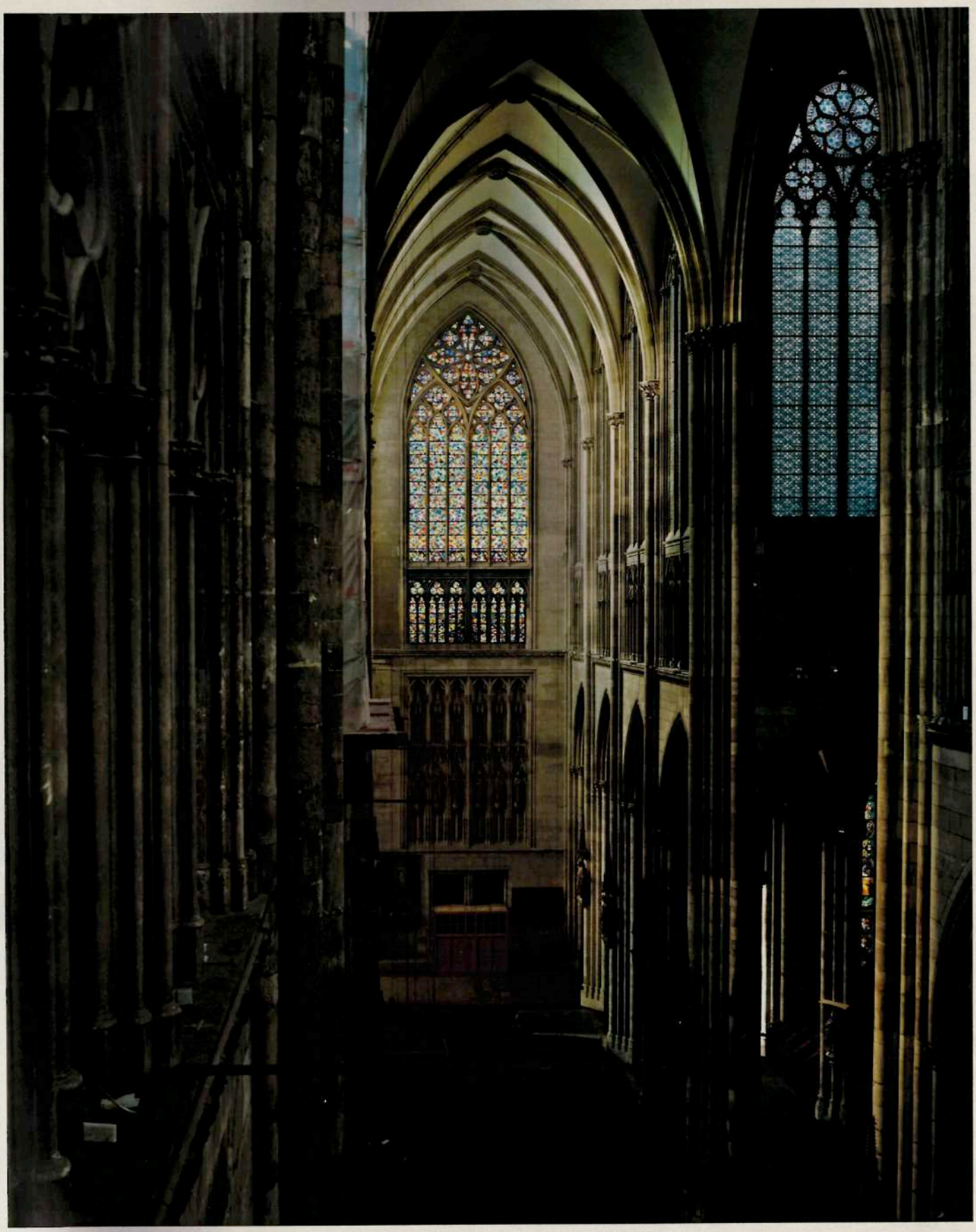
Personal testament MATISSE DESIGNED EVERY INCH OF THE CHAPEL OF THE ROSARY IN VENCE, FRANCE, FROM THE FURNITURE TO THE PRIESTLY ORNAMENTS.

installations, he's not sure. In any case, it figured into his design of the Live Oak Friends Meeting House in Houston, which includes a Turrell skyspace. In this case, Struth photographed the room with people inside it because without them, he explains, it's hard to sense the dimensions. You might note that these photographs are mostly unpeopled. Struth wanted to avoid reprising images he shot in the mid-'90s with tourists in Milan Cathedral and in San Zaccaria and the Frari in Venice, gazing at Titians and Bellinis. In those pictures, the paintings made the cathedral look like an antique shop, and the people, in sneakers with fanny packs, proved Benjamin's point about the secular cult of beauty having turned places of religious worship into stations of the cross of package tourism.

These new photographs are different. They're about the intersection of art with space and with us, as the consumers of both. Excepting Cologne, they show places in which the art doesn't just decorate the rooms but is inseparable from it, like a permanent art installation, where the architecture exists to serve the art. This was important to Struth. "As an artist," he said, "you construct what you might call the architecture of your work, which has its own context and rules that are like a private set of standards."

No supplication or reverence is required. Rothko's paintings are stylish and moody, but they're not necessarily holy. And Turrell's Meeting House skyspace, like all his projects, is as much about actual light as it is about spiritual light. Who knows what the always wily Richter meant by his abstract windows in the cathedral? They recall paintings he did years ago that mimicked paint color charts and could hardly have seemed more banal or mischievous. Then again, I believe I once saw a cross hanging in Richter's home.

Not that it matters. His work doesn't preach. And neither does Struth's. In art, as in religion, revelation has to remain a private affair. These spaces, and these pictures, are in the end meditations on that truth. ■



Digital intervention GERHARD RICHTER'S PIXILATED WINDOW FOR THE COLOGNE CATHEDRAL IS BASED ON TECHNOLOGY RATHER THAN FAITH.