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BLUE SKYS DARK SPACES

Across the U.S., a summer of exhibitions by
James Turrell prompted a re-evaluation of this master
of Light and Space

by Kirsten Swenson

IT WAS ONE OF THOSE perfect California days in early summer—bright sun, blue sky, palm trees fluttering. The campus of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art was in full, lush bloom. Yet, passing through the glass doors of the Resnick Pavilion, I found myself groping my way through total darkness. After navigating a narrow corridor, I took a seat on a balcony overlooking what could have been deep space. The sun was a vivid afterimage as I contemplated the blackness for a prescribed 15 minutes. Eyes open, the blackest black. Eyes closed, blinding white streaks of light—"prisoner's cinema," as the effect is sometimes called. James Turrell calls it "seeing with your eyes closed."¹ After five minutes, a faint red orb seemed to appear—though I no longer trusted my vision to register anything actual. But after five more minutes, the orb was still there, a lodestar, the only orienting feature in *Dark Matters* (2011), Turrell's realm of darkness.

Turrell's "Dark Spaces" installations (including the piece at LACMA and *Pleiades* [1983], the earliest in the series, on permanent view at the Mattress Factory in Pittsburgh) are among the artist's best immersive environments. They're incredibly simple—a light-tight room, a dim incandescent bulb, silence. Turrell's installations take many forms, but all tend to be highly controlled environments, subtly engineered to dislocate the viewer from spatial coordinates through the manipulation or withholding of light and color. "When we go outside at noon, we squint; the pupil almost disappears. We weren't made for this light. We were made for the light of the cave, for twilight," Turrell explains. "What I've been working with all these years is the relationship of outside to inside."² This is in reference not only to architectural spaces—the nexus of California sun and a darkened interior—but also, more intriguingly, to the relationship of our sensate bodies to the world we perceive.

The normal condition of life is distraction: reading, speaking, watching, hearing, touching, we're embedded within a full

perceptual field. Turrell's environments are designed to inspire a heightened awareness of the body, making us eerily cognizant of the world as a product of perception. Turrell thinks deeply about the relationship of perception to what we understand as reality. His rhetoric of "feeling oneself see"³ echoes Maurice Merleau-Ponty's theories of embodiment, the notion of ourselves as intertwined with our environments through perception, our very identities formed through a "chiasm" between inside and outside. In addition, Turrell's religious upbringing as a Quaker helped shape the phenomenological and aesthetic dimensions of his art. He has never forgotten the minimal, light-infused and silent Quaker meeting rooms, and the idea of a direct, embodied encounter with the spiritual that is possible when the stimulations of the material world are removed.

Turrell's early work can succeed at provoking philosophical self-awareness in elegant and concise fashion. When we view his simple projections of light on walls from the late 1960s, we briefly understand them as three-dimensional shapes before seeing them as the flat planes of white light that they are. Yet starting in the 1990s, as Turrell began to use computer-programmed lighting displays and to design more specialized spaces, his work sometimes slipped into the realm of spectacle, a manufactured sublime that induces an isolating euphoria. Turrell's work can sometimes tend toward maximalism. One thinks particularly of the disorienting, color-saturated spaces called "Ganzfelds" (begun in the 1970s), or, even more radical, the "Perceptual Cells" (begun in the 1990s), in which programmed light sequences overwhelm our retinal capacities.

The vast, multi-venue survey of Turrell's career that this summer extended from Los Angeles to Houston (the Museum of Fine Arts) and New York (the Guggenheim Museum) provided a composite portrait of an artist whose installations are typically encountered in the singular. Turrell has emerged as an extreme and contradictory figure. At the Guggenheim, he

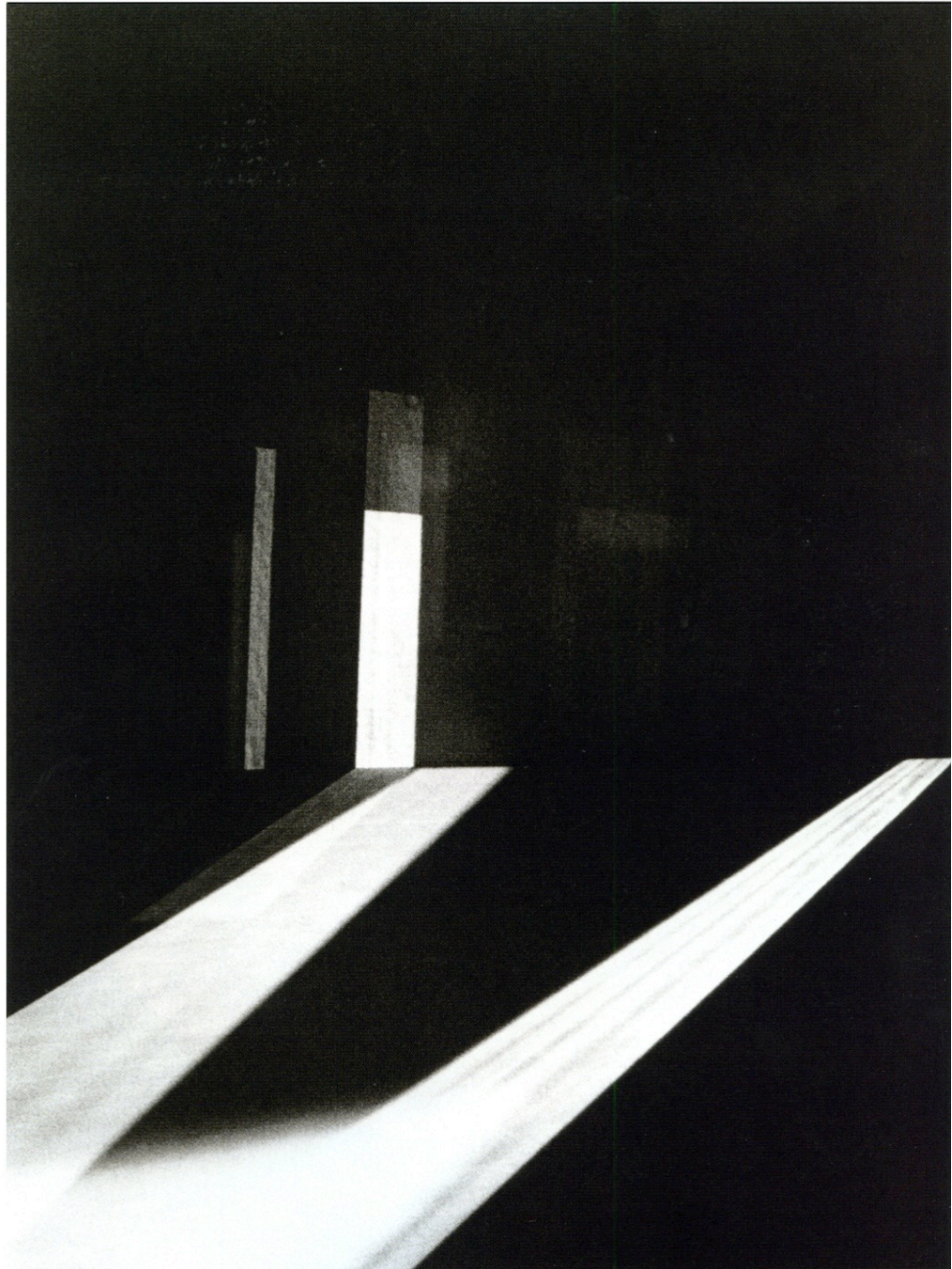
CURRENTLY
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See Contributors
page.



Previous page,
James Turrell:
Aten Reign, 2013,
daylight and
LED light; at
the Guggenheim
Museum,
New York. Photo
David Heald.

Mendota Stoppages,
1969-74, black-
and-white
photograph, 8½ by
6½ inches. Karen
Comegys-Wortz
and Edward
Wortz Collection.
Courtesy Los
Angeles County
Museum of Art.



was both coolheaded minimalist and conjurer of spirituality in the vein of Kandinsky, with achromatic works (*Prado (White)*, 1967, and *Iltar*, 1976) drawn from the Panza Collection, and *Aten Reign* (2013), an ambitious transformation of Frank Lloyd Wright's rotunda that seemingly realized the Guggenheim as a "temple of spirit," Hilla Rebay's foundational concept for the museum. At LACMA, Turrell is a shaman, offering mind-altering experiences of a post-human beyond. Here, the spaceshplike "Perceptual Cell" *Light Reignfall* (2011) and other immersive spaces lend a theme-park dimension to the Resnick Pavilion. (Reservations are required for *Light Reignfall*, and long waits are the norm for the other environments. The rest of the show is at LACMA's Broad Contemporary Art Museum.)

Turrell heads a design firm that builds exquisite, temple-like spaces for a large roster of clients; elsewhere in L.A., he has created a major new private gallery for the art consultancy Kayne Griffin Corcoran on LaBrea Avenue, and in Las Vegas, two permanent installations in the Daniel Libeskind-designed Crystals Mall. In Houston, the Turrell retrospective offered insights into *Twilight Epiphany* (2012), the monumental Turrell pavilion on the campus of Rice University that is both a "Skyspace"—a geometric cut framing the open sky in the manner of the Pantheon, which "brings the sky down into the space"⁴—and a performance space, and the intimate *One Accord* (2001), in the main room at the Live Oaks Friends meetinghouse. Off in northern Arizona, Turrell is a new-age visionary, building a celestial shrine out of an extinct volcano—the not-yet-accessible Roden Crater project. Under way since the late 1970s, Roden is a key reference point for all three museum shows, even if its import is hard to grasp without experiencing the site.

Turrell has enjoyed decades of international private and public commissions but little significant exposure in art-world centers (his show at the Guggenheim was his first at a New York museum since 1980). Together, the shows cast him as a major artist, able to transcend cultural differences as well as the complexities of the contemporary art scene—with its confusing muddle of styles, practices and market concerns—through the basic human appeal of light and color. The three concurrent retrospectives occupied a total of 92,000 square feet, the largest simultaneous dedication of museum space to an artist ever.

TURRELL'S WORK DID NOT ALWAYS exhibit such commanding presence. After graduate school at the University of California, Irvine, where he studied with John McCracken, Turrell emerged along with a group of Southern California artists, notably Robert Irwin, associated with the Light and Space movement. From 1966 until 1974, he leased the abandoned Mendota Hotel in the Ocean Park section of Santa Monica, painting the storefront windows of the hotel's first floor to seal out the sunlight. Here, using modified slide projectors, he developed his "Projection Pieces," the earliest works on display in each of the three venues. Single geometric shapes hover on the walls of darkened galleries. Strong shafts of light in darkness, these early projections possess a surprising drama. *Afrum I (White)*, 1966, shown at LACMA, and

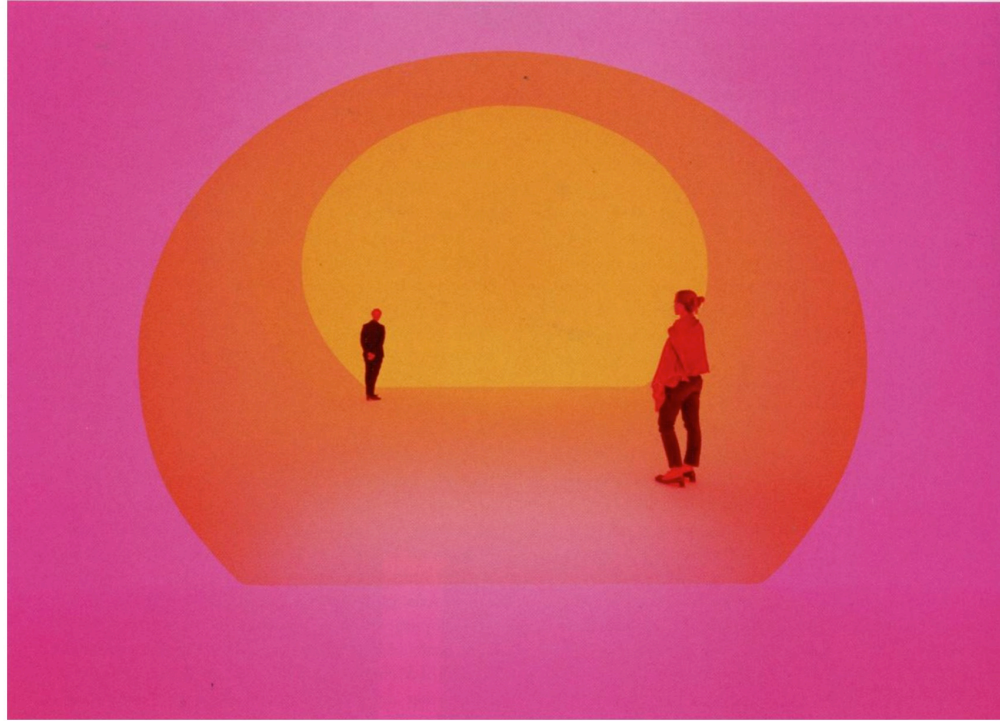
Afrum I (White), 1967, shown at the Guggenheim, fluctuate in appearance as a hexagon, a cube and a hole in the wall, integrating the angles where walls meet to complete the illusion. *Prado (White)*, also at the Guggenheim, is a rectangular projection that implies a tunnel. As in Minimalism, the body of the spectator is engaged and compelled (one thinks, for instance, of the need to circumambulate Donald Judd's boxes), but Turrell was working with a seemingly immaterial medium to create ephemeral spatial illusions.

At the same time, Turrell made apertures in the painted windows of his Mendota studio and cut holes in the walls between rooms, staging "projections" of both sunlight and the ambient nighttime beams of streetlights and passing cars.⁵ These were considered "performances," in which audiences of friends and artists moved from room to room for the "choreographed" projections, or simply sat in darkness. Turrell had attended a performance of John Cage's silent compositions as an undergraduate at Pomona College. The void was a formative concept that Turrell would transfer from the aural to the visual (though silence still plays an important role in the experience of Turrell's environments.) While Cage embraced incidental phenomena, Turrell sought to exclude and control ambient distractions to draw attention to the act of perception itself—"feeling yourself see."

A series of photographs on display at LACMA, the "Mendota Stoppages" (1969-74), involves multiple exposures that track shafts of light in the Mendota studio. The process is reminiscent of Moholy-Nagy's Bauhaus experiments with light, and akin to that of the camera obscura (a prime example of which is the famous Santa Monica Camera Obscura on Ocean Avenue, built in 1898). Turrell's "Mendota Stoppages" are grainy and blurry, documentary evidence of the sun's passage through the sky on a day in the late 1960s in Ocean Park. (In this regard, the compositions also relate unexpectedly to Richard Diebenkorn's "Ocean Park" abstractions from the same time and place, which are likewise linked to the local architecture and sunlight.) The Mendota Hotel years were the greatest revelation of the "summer of Turrell." The work produced there anticipated what would become Turrell's decades-long concerns: site specificity, absence as fullness and the subtle manipulation of perceptual experience.

Also during the Mendota years, Turrell began making architectural cuts in the walls of rooms, into which he inserted lights. He called these "Shallow Space Constructions." Instead of using architecture as a surface for projected light, he modified it to contain hidden, radiance-emanating compartments. *Ronin* (1968) at the Guggenheim, *Raemar Pink White* at LACMA and *Ronin Blue* (both 1969) at the Houston MFA demonstrate this critical shift. The "Shallow Space Constructions" represent a departure from the literality of New York Minimalism. For Judd, Frank Stella, Robert Morris and others, there was to be no illusionism—no hiding the support of a painting or the base of a sculpture. "What you see is what you see," as Stella famously put it. At the same time, Irwin was experimenting with light and illusion in his disc paintings, which appeared to "float ambiguously" when hit with floodlights.⁶ It was not of concern to Turrell or Irwin that the tech-

Akboh, 2013, LED light; in a Louis Vuitton store at Crystals Mall, Las Vegas. Photo Florian Holzherr.



nical apparatus and support were hidden (unlike, say, to Dan Flavin, whose fluorescent tubes were mounted in their pans directly on the wall). Sleight of hand—in Turrell’s case, perfect bevels and seamless rooms that conceal the sources of diffused light, eliminating architectural lines or shadows—became a hallmark of Light and Space artists.

Turrell’s “Space Division Constructions,” begun in the 1970s, are marked by a full-fledged ambiguity, well beyond the illusionism of the “Shallow Space Constructions,” in which it’s at least evident that light is hidden in the wall. The Guggenheim displayed the achromatic *Iltar* (1976), a large dark gallery with a rectangular void in one wall. Concealed in the recessed space is a tungsten light that emits a granular, grayish glow. The rectangle seems both to recede into the wall and hover before it. (While I was there, more than one viewer extended a hand through the void, just to confirm it was there, though this was discouraged by museum guards.) At LACMA, *St. Elmo’s Breath* (1992) is a rectilinear abyss emanating pink, blue and purple light. With the “Space Division Constructions,” the visual apparatus is mysterious; by this point, Turrell firmly understood his art as one of perceptual and emotional experience, in which disorientation plays a key role.

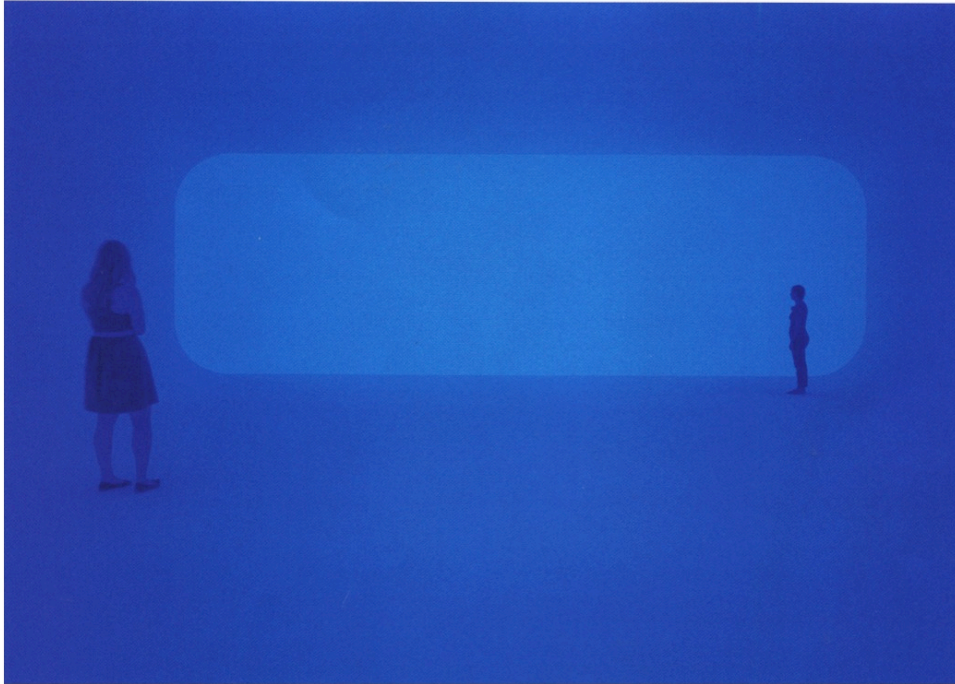
Turrell’s sleight of hand preoccupied art historian and critic Rosalind Krauss when she viewed the Panza Collection in Paris in 1990, and her influential essay of that year, “The Cultural

Logic of the Late Capitalist Museum,” contains a withering critique of his work. She was quite possibly describing *Iltar* when she wrote:

A barely perceptible luminous field in front of one appears to gradually thicken and solidify, not by revealing or bringing into focus the surface which projects this color, a surface which we as viewers might be said to perceive, but rather by concealing the vehicle of the color and thereby producing the illusion that it is the field itself which is focusing, that it is the very object facing one that is doing the perceiving *for* one.⁷

For Krauss, this was a serious problem. It implied “a derealized subject—a subject that no longer does its own perceiving but is involved in a dizzying effort to decode signs that emerge from within a no longer mappable or knowable depth.” This was a symptom, Krauss contended, of the “the hysterical sublime,” a condition of postmodernism identified by the literary critic Fredric Jameson that implies a “fragmented and technologized subject.”⁸ In fact, Turrell endorses this notion of an environment that “does one’s perceiving for one”; a 1992 “Skyspace” at the Israel Museum in Jerusalem is titled *Space That Sees*.

Reading Turrell through Jameson’s influential theories of postmodernism, Krauss saw the artist’s unknowable,



Breathing Light,
2013. LED light;
at LACMA. Photo
Florian Holzherr.

mysterious voids as promulgating a “euphorically dizzy sense of the museum as hyperspace.”⁹ The critic Dave Hickey put it differently to me in an offhand remark: “Turrell’s a good artist. A better artist than Ólafur Eliasson, but not as good as Siegfried and Roy.” Bodies don’t vanish or hover in clouds of fog as they do in a magician’s act, but Turrell’s an illusionist all the same.

In 1968, Turrell, along with Irwin, was invited to participate in LACMA’s famed Art & Technology program (an initiative of curator Maurice Tuchman). The two artists were matched with Edward Wortz, a scientist who was studying perceptual problems encountered in outer space by astronauts in the Apollo program. A pilot in fog or an astronaut in space could suffer loss of depth perception from immersion in undifferentiated fields. Irwin and Turrell proposed to combine the experience of a ganzfeld (or total visual field) with that of an anechoic chamber, a space with walls that absorb all sound waves, eliminating ambient noises and allowing total silence. Much research was conducted but no artwork materialized, in part because Turrell withdrew from the project.¹⁰ Yet the idea proved critical for both artists; Turrell drew on principles explored in the collaboration with Irwin and Wortz later for the “Ganzfelds” and the “Perceptual Cells.”

In the “Ganzfelds,” a diffuse yet somehow deeply saturated colored light floods rooms constructed with no right angles

and inclined floors that drop off into a seeming void. These environments create the illusion that light doesn’t illuminate objects and color doesn’t reflect from material things. Rather, color and light appear to exist in and for themselves as abstractions, freed from the limits of the physical world. Mark Rothko and Barnett Newman wanted viewers to stand close to their paintings so that color would fill the field of vision, but Turrell intended the “Ganzfelds” to be like walking around *inside* a painting, becoming enveloped in changing sequences of color. In *Akhhob*, which occupies the third floor of the Louis Vuitton boutique in Las Vegas, and *Breathing Light*, at LACMA (both 2013), viewers wander within unclear spatial limits, experiencing a powerful retinal saturation of chroma.

AT LACMA, THREE WOMEN in white lab coats assist participants onto a white-cushioned gurney to experience *Light Reignfall*. Perhaps their presence is meant to be reassuring—everything’s happening in a controlled, hospital-like environment—but the medical trappings also suggest the possibility of trauma or even death. Is one about to “cross over”? Formally, the apparatus evokes the minimal sci-fi aesthetic of Stanley Kubrick’s *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968). Or an MRI machine. I signed a waiver and was given a panic button, and the choice “Hard” or “Soft,” referring to the duration and intensity of the program. I chose “Hard.”

Space That Sees,
1992, concrete,
limestone and
fluorescent light
with dimmers; at
the Israel Museum,
Jerusalem. Photo
Nahum Slapak.



Once my bed slid on its track into the white capsule and the portal closed, I stared up at a dome saturated with azure and fuchsia light, an enhanced version of familiar atmospheric colors—the hard blue sky and heightened sunsets of the American West. Though the capsule wasn't large, I felt a sense of deep space, as if my body were hovering in the stratosphere. The next 12 minutes melted into something akin to the disembodied surrealism of an acid trip. A low aural thrumming kept time with pulsating colors, whose intensity—more than my retina could process—started to build. Afterimages coincided with fresh exposures, layer upon layer, in a kaleidoscopic effect. Colliding supernovas and the electric zigzags of a migraine aura spread across my field of vision. Stimulation and perception were confused. What was being perceived? What was real? What was reality, anyway? I was reminded of what Robert Smithson said of his film *Spiral Jetty*—he hoped viewing it would “hurl one into a lucid vertigo.”¹¹ That film belonged to the analog world of 1970; the lens flares and spiraling aerial shots of the Great Salt Lake technologized nature. Turrell's computerized light programs transform “nature” into a disembodied spectacle that Smithson would not have recognized.

At the May opening at Kayne Griffin Corcoran, margaritas flowed and the “Perceptual Cell” *Meditation Chamber* was deployed like a party drug. “It's better than the one at LACMA—it's more intense, it has the new technology,” someone observed. In fact, the 18-minute program was gentler than the one for *Light Reignfall*, with a longer intro and outro of pure color. This time the act of shutting out the world and succumbing to pure perception, the chance to study how perception happens, was meditative. I was deeply aware of my body, its limits and the existence of the world as a construct of my perceptions. The aloneness of this encounter, and my relief at returning to a bubbly party, were humbling.

Turrell's celebrated “Skyspaces” were almost entirely eclipsed by chambers of artificial light in the summer of Turrell. In its publicity, the Houston MFA highlighted *Twilight Epiphany* and *One Accord*, the city's two “Skyspaces.” Though there was discussion of creating a new “Skyspace” at LACMA, this did not materialize (for budgetary reasons, Turrell explained),¹² and the “Skyspaces” were otherwise absent from the three retrospectives (except for a pointless slide show at LACMA). The “Skyspaces” are Turrell's most popular form of private commission, and there are also extraordinary examples in public venues. Notable is the early *Meeting* (1986) at MoMA PS1 in Queens, an intimate square room with simple wooden benches around the perimeter, the late-afternoon sky visible through a neatly beveled square cut in the ceiling. As the title indicates, the work is directly linked to the artist's thoughts about Quaker worship. Integrated into a former office in the old school building, *Meeting* frames the sky above Queens. Airplanes from LaGuardia glide soundlessly across the picture plane. There is a sense of communal solitude as viewers meditate upon an urban sky that is rarely a focal point in everyday life in New York City.

Museumgoers learned about Roden Crater through photographs and descriptions at all three venues, and an exhibition at Kayne Griffin Corcoran, titled “Sooner Than Later, Roden

Crater,” presented models, plans and stereoscopic photographs of the hybrid Land art temple. The Guggenheim's rotunda was transformed into a monumental “Sky Light Space” (not to be confused with a “Skyspace”; thanks to the museum's oculus, a cut was unnecessary). *Aten Reign* was intended to reference the great opening in the Roden Crater project, which was, in turn, inspired in part by the design of the Guggenheim. Concentric ellipses mounted the rotunda, combining natural and artificial, colored light. The effect photographs beautifully, but the rotunda seemed to collapse into what felt like a low-ceilinged, compact space. The ellipses were awkward in Wright's building, in which a circle motif is manifest even at the level of the floor tiles. The fact is, Wright's rotunda is a magnificent “Sky Light Space” without modification, and *Aten Reign* was more contradiction than homage.

“It's terrific outside, we probably all ought to be there,” Turrell told a crowd gathered at his Guggenheim opening. Turrell's work may not make the most sense in Wright's highly stylized masterpiece, nor, for that matter, in the dense, vertical environment of Manhattan. Even if it entails entering dark spaces, Turrell's art functions best where there are wide views of the sky, whether in L.A., Arizona or even the former industrial neighborhood surrounding MoMA PS1. “I have a business of selling blue sky and colored air,” Turrell said half-jokingly in L.A.¹³ Selling the sky is something artists, from Ruisdael to Bierstadt, have done for hundreds of years. Turrell is a landscape artist for the 21st century, extending the pictorial into the realm of experience, reminding us of nature by immersing us in artifice. Perhaps the two aren't so far apart anymore. ○

1. James Turrell, comments to press at the Guggenheim Museum, June 20, 2013.

2. *Ibid.*

3. James Turrell, quoted in Michael Govan and Christine Y. Kim, *James Turrell: A Retrospective*, New York, Prestel, 2013, p. 13.

4. James Turrell, comments to press at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, May 22, 2013.

5. This was several years before Gordon Matta-Clark's “anarchitectural” cuttings, which created surreal, fleeting environments in abandoned industrial buildings and others slated for demolition, disrupting architectural boundaries between outside and inside.

6. Lawrence Weschler, *Seeing Is Forgetting the Name of the Thing One Sees: A Life of Contemporary Artist Robert Irwin*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1982, p. 104.

7. Rosalind Krauss, “The Cultural Logic of the Late Capitalist Museum,” in Donald Preziosi, ed., *Grasping the World: The Idea of the Museum*, New York, Ashgate, 2004, p. 609.

8. *Ibid.*

9. *Ibid.*

10. Turrell would subsequently dismiss the importance of the collaboration with Irwin, saying, “I don't know that anything startling came out of the whole thing.” Irwin described himself as hurt and baffled by Turrell's withdrawal (Weschler, p. 131). By chance, Turrell's Guggenheim installation coincided in New York with the remounting at the Whitney Museum of Irwin's landmark *Scrim veil—Black rectangle—Natural light*, first shown at the Whitney in 1977.

11. “The Spiral Jetty,” in Jack Flam, ed., *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1996, p. 152.

12. James Turrell at LACMA; see n. 4.

13. *Ibid.*

“James Turrell: The Light Inside” was on view at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, June 9–Sept. 22, and “James Turrell” appeared at the Guggenheim Museum, New York, June 21–Sept. 25. Turrell's retrospective at LACMA (May 26, 2013–Apr. 6, 2014) will travel to the Israel Museum, Jerusalem, June 1–Oct. 18, 2014, and the National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, Dec. 12, 2014–Apr. 6, 2015. It is accompanied by a 304-page catalogue by Michael Govan and Christine Y. Kim, with essays by Alison de Lima Greene and E. C. Krupp.