

Robert Irwin: De-objectifications for Philosophic and Actual Bodies

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by Carolee Thea

Part I: Prologue: X 183, 1998. View of mixed-media installation

Robert Irwin's new work, "Prologue: X 183", is the first of a two-part installation on the third floor of the Dia Center for the Arts in New York City. The entire space is divided into 18 chambers by fine white mesh scrim, a material that Irwin first discovered being used as window coverings in Amsterdam in 1970. At Dia, the scrims are stapled to their supports like stretched canvases and soar to the ceiling to define the open, cubed areas. As in most works of this kind, the forms are determined by the artist, but it is the viewer who activates the paths.

Irwin's precision, attention to minute detail, and passionate concern for the consistency of the whole are evidenced in this work. The measure of the empty spaces between chambers suggests the thickness of a wall or a body, or the light emanating through the north-south windows orienting the viewer. Near the center, the natural light dims while shadows flatten to allow something else to emerge. Here, vertical fluorescent lights affixed to the ceiling above emit an eerie artificiality, while the meditative nature of the repetitions combines with a sense of inside-outside play to help viewers create their own contemplative space.

When Kasimir Malevich did a white-on-white painting and was accused of nihilism, he looked his public in the eye and said, "Ah, but we have a world of pure feeling." One viewer told me she thought that Irwin's installation was like a device for sensory deprivation. Her reaction typifies the entertainment orientation of today's glutted global art culture. Irwin's work usually has a kind of "unthingness," presenting not visual objects, but an uncanny reflexivity to the viewer. Irwin says, "The real beauty of philosophy is the examination of your own moment, your own being in circumstance." He continues: "When people walk into a gallery where I've installed some of the things I've been doing recently, a lot of them say, "Oh, it's an empty room". The question then, of course, is empty of what?" The point of Irwin's work is to draw people into a place once considered too incidental to have meaning. For an artist to make the viewer a critical player by inscribing his or her specific experience into the work is a humanistic goal. Irwin defines a phenomenological or mystical path that may allow him and the viewer to escape from Modernism or the dictates of a critical guru.

Irwin was first an illustrator and then an abstract painter who became disaffected with the gestural element of abstraction, which, for him, denied the viewer a direct perceptive experience. Rooted in the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty, Irwin's belief is consonant with the effort to understand the way people think and to redefine their relations with themselves and the world - to stand back, suspend judgment, and grasp things and ideas.

"Untitled", 19667. Sprayed acrylic lacquer on shaped aluminum, 48 in. diameter.

The history of modern art can be read as a progressive reduction of imagery and of gesture. Malevich wrote in 1915, "Over the past millennia, the artist has striven to approach the depiction of an object as closely as possible, to transmit meaning, essence and purpose. Now objects have vanished like smoke, for the sake of a new culture of art, a new art with metaphysical implication." From 1920 to 1923 a Malevich's colleague, El Lissitzky, installed his works, titled Prouns, in Berlin. They were considered interchange stations between painting and architecture. Such Suprematist ideas, among the antecedents to Irwin's work, were derailed by the political situation. The De Stijl artists (Piet Mondrian and Theo van Doesburg), also attempted to make an integrative art. Salon De Madame B. Dresden, an environment created by Mondrian in 19226 was not exhibited until 1970 at the Pace Gallery in New York City.

In the early 60's the breaking down of rigid artistic classifications began again in the New York studios of Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns. Irwin and a group of California artists also aimed to remove the boundaries between painting, sculpture and architecture, but made use of new materials like plastics, light, space, and color to do it.

Irwin shared ideas with some Minimalists, although the California artists were not, strictly speaking, part of that movement, because of their use of dissolving and seductive materials and surfaces. For Irwin and James Turrell, these materials were necessary components in dealing with light and space even while the ultimate goal was to seek the elimination of the object. At first, light, dark, sun, and shadow; time and space; sound and silence; and fire, smoke, scrim, and string were the materials. Over the years, becoming more complex in method and mediums, they began to use dielectricoated glass, luminescent and phosphorescent agents, Plexiglas, polyester resin, cast acrylic, Fiberglas, neon, fluorescent lights, and hi-intensity and xenon projectors.

Philosophical questions of the nature of ones being in the world merged with light phenomena for these artists through their study of both Oriental mysticism and aerospace scientist explorations in brain probes and sensory deprivation. The aerospace industry had attempted to specify and to quantify mystical phenomena, enabling them to experience subtle introspective states during which one's perceptual system could become more acute.

In 1971, the Experiments in Art and Technology Project (E.A.T.) matched artists with scientists, mathematicians, technicians, and engineers from major corporations and industries. One project, led by Jane Livingston, an associate curator at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, teamed Irwin, Turrell, and Edward Wortz, an experimental psychologist from Garrett Aerospace. For several months the three pursued whatever interested them: they sat in anechoic chambers; they played with light; they discussed ideas. Neither the art hardware nor the fascination with spectacle of the E.A.T. projects coincided with the true focus of Irwin's interest however. He took a more physiological approach in which perception precedes conception. He was interested in dissolving the object in the subject.

Born in 1928 in Long Beach, California, Irwin studied art at the Otis Institute in California. He became a hot-rod enthusiast, ballroom dancer, handicapper at the track, and Abstract Expressionist. His paintings, influenced by Philip Guston, Willem de Kooning, Clyfford Still, and Ad Reinhardt, were exhibited at the L.A. Ferus Gallery when Irving Blum became the director, he hung out with artists who dabbled in Zen and Oriental philosophies, like Alan Lynch and Craig Kauffman. Other Ferus friends were Ed Kienholz, Billy Al Bengston, and Ed Moses. Irwin's interest in abstraction waned, and he followed a reductive path influenced by the work of Giorgio Morandi. He began to explore human perception.

His first breakthrough was with a group of handheld paintings (1959-60). Reduced in scale, they were meant to be experienced privately, breaking down the barrier between the artist's gesture and his audience. Four of these were exhibited at the Pace-Wildenstein mini-retrospective this past spring. The paintings of the next period, Pier Series (1959) and "Crazy Otto" (1962), had the muted background colors of Morandi but with a few thin fluorescent-like lines painted as if light were streaking the surface. In Untitled (1963-4), the painted cadmium yellow background was streaked with two thin fluorescent-bright yellow horizontal lines--like a light trying to break through a seam. Irwin was concerned here not with the color itself but with illumination. In Untitled (1966), he suspended an 82-by-82-inch canvas six inches from the wall. This one was filled with a gnomonic rendering of pink and green dots, more intense in the center and disintegrating nine inches before the edge, making the edge seem to dematerialize. The work cast a shadow that activated the surrounding space.

By using round or oval shapes, Irwin then sought to eliminate the dilemma of the edge. Two of Irwin's disc paintings, originally exhibited in Sao Paolo VIII in 1965, were also shown at Pace Gallery last spring. One, made of spun aluminum, is projected 18 inches from the wall. In order to diffuse the light within the surface, Irwin sprayed 50 to 100 transparent, thin, grainy, matte-finished layers of automotive paint onto the work. Illuminated from four different sources above and below the disc, the form loses its identity in a tight, luminous quatrefoil. The halation, merged with the environment, creates a kind of virtual objecthood. The second disc, made of formed acrylic plastic, juts from the wall by means of a 24-inch clear Plexiglas cylinder. The acrylic surface material followed the aluminum in a natural progression toward the dematerialized object. These works were exhibited in a small show at the Pasadena Art Museum in 1968.

For Irwin, these works posed further questions rather than answers. From 1969 - 70 he made the last of his portable objects: a number of nearly visible, prism-like cast acrylic columns.

In 1970, Jenny Licht, a curator at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, invited Irwin to create an installation. Using the entire project space, Irwin suspended a white scrim 10 feet from the ground and attached shimmering stainless steel wires to the wall. Painted white only at the wall connections, the wires appeared to float while they and the scrim divided the room. The environment was lit with alternating warm and cool lights. This work was followed by others using scrim. In Prologue: X 183, the new work at the Dia Foundation, Irwin heightens and refines the viewer's apprehension of a situation, through his understanding of the specifics of the site, its context, its space, and its formal qualities.

The second part of the Dia installation, Excursus: Homage to the Square (after Josef Albers) is scheduled to open in the fall of 1998 and remain on view until June 1999. Irwin will introduce colored gels into the existing cubes which will bleed one color into the other and will modify the fluorescent light.

Though many of Irwin's projects have been realized, many exist only in drawings and plans. Many of his site works use landscape design as a form of sculpture and as a container for both viewer and architecture (such as the Central Garden), extending his interest in perception into a larger arena.

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