

TRIP THE LIGHT FANTASTIC

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The central event of James Turrell's work is the revelation of light as a material process. But light is less a medium for him than an instrument, a kind of probe, with which to work and explore a more essential medium, which is perception itself, our perception, the phenomenological unfolding of our experience in its encounter with his work and the invitation it provides for that very unfoldment. As such, Turrell speaks of effacing symbols, words, associations, and other modes of producing what we have come to call the "content" of an artistic work. But it is also the case that some of the spaces he has built to stage our own epiphanies, twilit or otherwise, carry their own baggage. Sacred baggage.

Take Rice University's *Twilight Epiphany*, one of the more monumental skyspaces made by the artist over his many years of making them. Entering into the earthwork, with its pyramidal ramparts, its eye in the sky, we face a choice of entrance or elevation, and either way we find ourselves, implicitly, in a hieratic domain. Other sacred spaces are conjured out of structural resonance: the Hopi kiva, Abu Simbel in Egypt, the pyramids of Teotihuacan, the mandala palaces of Tibet, the Neolithic chamber of Newgrange. Whether rooted in architectural convention or the neuro-cosmological geometries of number, form, and proportion—or, as is likely, a mix of the two—the sense of the sacred permeates or marks this monument. And yet we are at a secular institution, engaging an artwork whose name invokes that most secular reframing of spiritual experience: the epiphany. So what manner of sacred is this? And is it even the word? How to name what we see and feel without doing the work or the words injustice?

Turrell has said: "I believe in the need and thought of spiritual sensibilities or dimensions beyond us, but it is vital for me to take them away from the vocabulary of

religion.” This claim, this language, takes us into a crucial orientation of contemporary sacred life with the rather ungainly name of “spiritual but not religious,” a self-description claimed by a rapidly glowing portion of the population, particularly among young people. On the one hand, we have the desire to extract the pith from religion while leaving aside the dogmatism, institutional dynamics, and social politics of established religions, while also dodging the materialism, skepticism, and disenchanting hedonism of secular modernity. On the other hand, “spiritual but not religious” describes a vast and informal sensibility already established in modernity, one that finds its essence in a flow between and through traditions, and, even more importantly, between and through science, including healing science and the understanding of the mind. And at the center of this orientation is that tricky category of experience, the phenomenon and the phenomenology of consciousness and perception.

Though distant from religious institutions, modern art and architecture is deeply marked by the spiritual but not religious sensibility. Early Abstractionists like Mondrian and Kandinsky were swimming in seas of Theosophy, surrealists poached hermetic and alchemical traditions left and right, and even the arch modernist architect Le Corbusier crystallized some of his principles out of his rather unacknowledged occult studies. Houston is as good a city as any to see and experience the legacy of spiritual modernism, particularly in its architectural expression. The Rothko Chapel provides us with clerestory light, an invitation to contemplation, and both name and a habitation for “spiritual but not religious” programs and talks. In contrast, a couple football fields away lies Philip Johnson’s Chapel of St Basil at University of St Thomas, an unwaveringly religious space that deploys a recognizably modern language of minimalist affect and an innovative deployment of space, form, and light.

And then there’s the Live Oak Friends Meeting house in the Heights, a Quaker space of worship which stands as Houston’s first Turrell Skyspace. Turrell was raised in

a conservative Quaker family, which provides part of his spiritual legacy. The radical Protestant rejection of iconography, the minimalist design of meeting halls, and the internal Quaker practice of “going inside to greet the light” arguably undergirds Turrell’s quest to shift the plane from form to perception, and to create public spaces for the collective practice of silence and spontaneous epiphany. Turrell describes his fascination with inner light, the gentle atmospheres of phosphenes and neural watercolor washes we see when we attend to the space we find ourselves in, during meditation or contemplation, with our eyes closed, to say nothing of the extraordinary color in our most vivid dreams and visionary states. But these inner dynamics are also invited by his environments to engage the outside. With the skyspaces, as with his Ganzfeld experiments, he is creating environments where our internal psychophysical visual processes are difficult or impossible to extricate from external situations of visual engagement.

Is the phenomenological revelation of our own visual processes “religious”? Is it “spiritual but not religious?” When Turrell employs spiritual terms, he is likely to speak of the luminous voids of Tibetan Buddhism, an interest also suggested by the titles of his pieces, like *Bindu Shards*, *Dhatu*, and the cheeky *Bridget’s Bardo*. He has described his work as visual koans—suggesting how one notion of Zen practice popular in the west—that koans or Zen teaching stories are puzzles designed to undermine the rational mind through paradox—influence the boundary reversals and spatial ambiguities of his perceptual fields. Are these perceptions inside me or outside, or are they both—or neither? Here we find ourselves inside a framework of shifting perspectives captured in case 29 of the *Mumonkoan*. Two monks see a flag flapping in the wind and set to disputation. One says the flag is moving, the other, of broader perspective, insists the wind is moving. The master Huineng upbraids them: “*Gentlemen! It is not the wind that moves; it is not the flag that moves; it is your mind that moves.*”

But of course everything is moving: mind and matter and that peculiarly mindful matter that is light: the radiant vibrations in actual space. This materialist orientation is never far from Turrell for all his metaphysical poetry: he consistently speaks of light as a kind of matter that works perceptual systems. Turrell studied the psychology of perception as a young man and furthered his researches when participating in UCLA's Art and Technology program, which paired artists with industrial scientists and engineers. For a time Turrell collaborated on a Ganzfeld installation with Robert Irwin, a fellow California Light and Space artist, as well as Ed Worts, a psychologist who worked for an Aerospace corporation doing human-factors engineering for NASA missions. As a central space of the "spiritual but not religious" orientation, one that deeply marked West Coast Arts, California is also never far from industrial, perceptual, and even military-industrial technology.

A Ganzfeld is a disorienting, dissipative and totalizing visual field, such as we experience on either side of Turrell's underground walkway at the MFAH. For the UCLA program, the team wanted to combine this visual surround with a soundproof chamber. The device, which would elevate the individual participant into the anechoic chamber, was explicitly designed to break down the difference between "hallucination and reality." Turrell eventually walked off the project, but returned to the vision in recent series of "perception cells," which combine elements of isolation tanks and brain machines and look like MRIs attended by folks in lab coats. Far from negating the sacred aspirations of the work, ironically or otherwise, the proximity of Turrell's work to the techno-science of human perception reminds us that the fundamental orientation of "spiritual, but not religious"—with its central concern with experience—remains in intimate relationship with the technical evolution of psychology and particularly the phenomenology of so-called "altered states" of consciousness.

The sacred in Turrell, then, is a combination of temple architecture, radical Protestant contemplation, Asian meditative practices, and the postwar, industrial, psychedelic, and even science fictional technologies of perception. In other words, an American and particularly Californian spin on spiritual but not religious, a category revealed less as an identity than a space of encounter, negotiation, and discovery. And it forces us to wonder: Perhaps the sacred itself is becoming a reflexive category, a mirror of our own phenomenological unfolding as both perceptual animals and souls capable, despite it all, of epiphany and encounter. But the skyspace suggests that the sacred is less like a mirror, maybe, than like a frame, an empty frame, a frame of emptiness, but one that nonetheless shifts the phenomenological plane.

I came here earlier in the week at dusk, but inadvertently showed up on a night when they were not running the light sequence, so I watched the space fall into darkness without electronic modulation. Staring into the initially blue keystoned square of space, it was easy to see it as sky, especially with the swallows darting by and the occasional helicopter insect bound for Baylor. But with dusk, things—and nothings—began to shift. Turrell has said that humans are made for twilight, which awakens our eyes and sensitizes us to color in ways that the bleached light of daytime squelches. But twilight is a metaphor as well, a material metaphor for the in-between. As the gloaming grew, the field became more indistinct, with the purples and blacks and grays invoking the nearby panels of Rothko, whose subtle and radiant fields laid the groundwork for Turrell and other Light and Sound artists. At the same time, there was only the most moderate shifts in value, because one of the many tricks of our eye is to constantly and homeostatically modulate relative light levels. It was surprising to look about and realize how dark it had become.

Turrell speaks about the need of the nervous system to create closure, a closure that appeared the other night as a sudden flattening of the space of sky into a sort of

canvas whose subtle hatch-work texture seemed to pop out towards me. Despite the fading light, the resulting plane seemed to take on an additional glow, almost as if it had gained light as its profound depth collapsed into an abstract plane of now intimately contiguous points of light. In the grey twilight, the texture of the sky became intertwined with the vague phosphene activity of my own eye, with its worm-like blood vessels and hazy neural fireworks. Normally the light sequence begins, shaping and shifting the color of the enframed sky, reminding us yet again that it is our eye that is constructing the seen. No greater darkness was going to come, however because Houston is home to an extraordinary degree of what we call light “pollution.” But this is too demeaning a word. As Turrell has it, there is no artificial light. All light is the radiance of burning things.

The skyspace is not a portal to nature. We are not getting to know the real sky better, but our own construction of it, a construction that is framed and founded on a built space that is also, in its own terms, an architecture of seeing. For the structure itself is also a kind of eyeball, a non-transparent eyeball. When Turrell was a young artist living and working at the Mendoza Hotel in Ocean Park, California, he blocked out all the incoming light and then selectively opened up the space to the ambient light sources outside, making the entire hotel into a camera obscura—a machine, a space, whose optical logic resonates with the structure of our own eyeball. Today Turrell continues to construct the famed Roden Crater, an open-eye astronomy engine of cosmic perception and cosmic proportion. Like the Mendoza, and like *Twilight Epiphany*, it is another space that itself is looking. We see ourselves seeing but we also see a space that sees, that is the seeing of us. Our inner light is not separate from the space of encounter. “I believe light knows when we are looking,” says Turrell. This relational realization—mediated by space, and by the medium of light itself—does not offer enlightened immediacy, but a reformatting within a structural device that invites and forces an unfolding of perception as architectonic as it is organic, that phase-shifts along predictable waves of phenomena

according to algorithms buried in the hidden computer controls, as well as the more ancient algorithms buried in our visual cortex. These calculations of inner light are co-extensive with the space of this cosmic machine, a portal of seeing that offers the paradoxical gesture—the empty frame—of a temple of spiritual seeing that reduces the vocabulary of religion to a vanishing point.