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Subliminal Massage

James Turrell: A Retrospective, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra,
13 December 2014 – 8 June 2015

It has been said that you will always remember your first Turrell. This was my expectation upon entering the exhibition at the National Gallery of Australia (NGA). But not quite. I had arrived just in time for the skyspace lighting display that was about to commence outside. At dusk the first thing I sensed was the rapid drop in temperature. A column of cool air poured into the chamber where the public may sit, and then stand when there is no more room, waiting in anticipation for the carefully timed display through the skylight, an open aperture in the centre of the structure's domed ceiling. The stupa is made of Victorian basalt; a ring of artificial lights is hidden in the bulkhead. A central platform is surrounded by a rectilinear pool interior to a landscaped pyramid integrated with the Australian Garden that is adjacent to the NGA's car park. *Within /Without* (2010) is the American artist James Turrell's first permanent Australian skyspace structure, which also acted for a time as a precursor to his career-spanning survey exhibition, unrolled over two years around the artist's seventieth birthday. From May 2013 until April 2015, *James Turrell: A Retrospective* was a large-scale production anticipated in Australia by the premier iteration, which was shown at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art from 26 May 2013 to 6 April 2014. Concurrent shows opened at New York's Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum and the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston during this period. The show then travelled to the Israel Museum in Jerusalem (1 June – 18 October 2014), finally reaching Canberra in December 2014.

The exhibition began at the entrance to the temporary galleries. This provided the literal and figural support for Turrell's celebrated work, whereby he installs, manipulates, and refines lighting directly into the existing architecture of the blankly modern art gallery. On first impression, this seamless integration with the space appears at once colossal and kitsch, turning it into an empty vessel akin to a world exposition without signs. On a Friday evening waspish bureaucrats predominate on the floor of the galleries, where Pop art can once again freely collide with Turrell's psychology of perception: a psychology trained, as it is, on the accommodation and isolation of individual experience. This perceptual atomisation and user-focussed ideology of distributed models for governance is particularly impressive as it appeared proximate to Australia's Federal Parliament, amplifying the coercive aspect of Turrell's work in its capital territory location. Before exploring the carefully selected examples of saturated colour projections, ambiances, and holograms that now span five decades, I waited to enter the 'Ganzfeld' *Virtuality Squared* (2014), under the instructive administration of an invigilator who asked us to first remove our shoes and place synthetic slippers over our socks before entering what seemed to be a two dimensional screen but was in fact an opening into a large, light-filled chamber with a larger screen at its end, before which stood a security guard. The elusive totality of this light-saturated spectacle is at once thrilling and difficult to behold. The guard protects us from the edge of the floor, past which no depth can be registered. Like the show, it becomes ever harder to maintain a vigilant grasp on just how interconnected this mix of dazzling illusion and seductive power is to the distributed networks of global contemporary art, so often targeted at the level of individual visual perception.

The lights of the Ganzfeld cycle through their colour combinations, saturating and fluctuating the temperature of the room almost imperceptibly. The gesture towards these perceptual limits captures our attention.

It's worth noting that Turrell's diffused light architecture forms the background to the video clip accompanying pop-musician Drake's track 'Hotline Bling', particularly given it was opportunistically incorporated into the NGA's final public messages about the Canberra exhibition. Not only has the Turrell retrospective been exhibited in galleries around the world, but his signature light and space aesthetic has also gone viral, the centre of a pop culture gripped by linked-in and intersectional reverence, "nostalgia" for the highlights of the finish fetish in American modernism – his work *Bullwinkle* was also the framing device for Bryson Tiller's single 'Don't' in August 2015 which has now been viewed, 100 million times on YouTube. Alongside 'Hotline Bling' this means Turrell's retrospective mode has reached nearly 1 billion viewers through YouTube in the last year alone. This contemporaneous re-alignment with digital screen culture is as disorienting for our time as it is for the past.¹ It conceals an ability to seamlessly integrate a selection of recent history into the relentless cycle of disseminable 'content' nowadays requires careful powers of deduction, as much as it does taste-making production. This may be seen in a rampantly viral three-minute pop-music video, or, quite seriously alongside advertising for giant tech companies like Google's Vevo, or even ActewAGL—Canberra's electricity supplier, which boasts that it is 'helping to generate creative energy' for the NGA for the duration of the Turrell exhibition.

Can we blame Turrell for being stalked by those desperate for pop-cultural capital? Despite dedicating a career to pursuing largely solo impulses—flying a small airplane, living in the desert, and blocking out all the windows of his studio—Turrell can't seem to shake the ecstatic and popular reception of his increasingly messianic work.² Walking into the temporary exhibition gallery of the NGA—having already visited the skyspace—the choice was one of either the Ganzfeld, or the isolating perceptual cell, *Bindu Shards* (2010). Depending on how well you had planned ahead, you may have been permitted to be plugged straight into the centre of Turrell's solitary universe. Completed by two white-coated lab attendants, a pseudo-clinical gurney slides you straight into a small sphere. There are two 'speeds' for the light-show once you are fully inside the cell, where an attendant initially observes you for your safety via a small hole in the outer shell of the spherical cell. You may then be further reassured by the presence of notebooks and a computer screen display depicting a program interface replete with some kind of information, the decorative

¹ Another co-option of the work was the event 'Nude Tours' by Australian artist Stuart Ringholt, a decidedly un-photogenic attempt to take the work beyond its spectacularly modernist aesthetic. The adults-only, naked walking tour of the gallery is a work that is owned by the MCA and which parasitically uses the model of the gallery exhibition space to confront gallery visitors own feelings on looking and being looked at. To the extent that Turrell's work relies on the existing architecture of the gallery, Ringholt's work made for an interesting intervention. The tours, organised by the gallery, where held on 1 and 2 April 2015 and popularly attended.

² During a reception at the Guggenheim, Turrell coolly stated: 'It could be that the desert attracts that kind of person, or that after living there, you become that. It doesn't make much difference. But now I've done my 40 years in the desert. Joshua and Caleb made it into the Promised Land after 40 years. With Christ it was 40 days. We have this thing about the desert.' *Aten Reign*, the title of the new installation at the Guggenheim was apparently named for the mythic first appearance of monotheism in ancient Egypt, during the brief reign of Akhenaten c.1350 BC. Turrell cited in West, 2013.

ornamentation carefully presents the experience as based on alternative psychology. Then, for ten minutes, you are alone with your thoughts and bombarded with colour. From the isolation tank and back to earth it is clear that a disorienting artificial effect masked as natural—i.e. the entire reaches of the colour spectrum—is the basis of the work and for the whole exhibition.

Progressively the viewer is guided through other chambers leading back to the entrance hall with the perceptual cell and the entrance to the Ganzfeld. The works featured eventually date back as far as *Afrum (white)* (1966). The catalogue produced for the touring exhibition states that Turrell 'graduated from Pomona College in 1965 with a bachelor's degree in perceptual psychology and extensive coursework completed in art, math, and astronomy.'³ A preview article in the NGA's *Artonview* journal by the director of the Griffith Observatory, EC Krupp, states: 'Nearly 5000 years ago, the pharaoh Kufu might have commissioned someone like James Turrell to design the Great Pyramid at Giza.'⁴ Even though Turrell professes no architectural scope beyond the conditions for his light-focussed pavilions, Krupp, a Pomona alumnus, can seemingly confound light and large-scale construction easily enough when it comes to a monumental figure such as Turrell, who marks the modernist American sensibility with a religiosity usually reserved for clerics. With the Roden Crater project, featured through documentary and display format in the NGA show, Turrell did in fact begin to create a kind of astronomical observatory complex in 1979 with the support of the Dia Art Foundation and the funding body 'Friends of the Roden Crater'. An kind of inverse pyramid in a high-altitude volcanic field north of Phoenix, the Roden Crater seems destined to become an exclusive getaway for those with cash and time to spare, one that will feature a suspended pool modelled on the human eye and which will eventually align with astronomical calculations and planned to reach perfect lunar symmetry in 2000 years from now. It is clearly an ambitious project that manages to rival in scope the Egyptian wonder of ancient monolithic architecture, albeit in our own derealised contemporary. The scale of the project surely says more about the current trajectory of the art-world, however, than the cosmologies of our "global" culture.

In a way that must seem diametrically opposed to the early stoppages of his studio project at the Mendota Hotel, where the artist locked himself in isolation by only allowing controlled light shards to penetrate the building, Turrell has spent the last two years triumphantly out of the box and transcending the Light and Space movement of his early career—now entering the master-artist stratosphere. Located as it was in the c.1966 Venice Beach west-coast counter-culture, the Ocean Park building that originates his artist-mythology now pins the mature artist to the spotlight of American popular conscious, as a successful survivor and cowboy-like representative of a period captured askance by Thomas Pynchon in *Inherent Vice*, a 2009 novel recently brought to the screen by the virtuoso of American undercurrent sentimentality, Paul Thomas Anderson. As well as Krupp's suggestion that Turrell's pure light-work is 'without ideological overlay,' in a similarly revealing interpretation, LACMA's Michael Govan concludes his catalogue contribution by squarely fixing the reception of Turrell's work on the plane of a transcendently spiritual America. After noting Turrell's religious upbringing he writes: 'Quaker

³ Kim, 2013, p. 37.

⁴ Krupp, 2014, p. 4.

practice can be seen as the Minimalism of Christianity, a reduction in form in search of a deeper, more honest effect.⁵ Following this logic, one further definition of Turrell's brand of Minimalism could be to see it as the emptied and devoutly non-oppositional form of secular capital, precisely because of the fact that it refuses Minimalism's formal reduction in preference for expansion *ad infinitum*. It lays the myth of the pure idea at the altar of American empire.

To say Turrell is currently in vogue is therefore something of an understatement. It may in fact lead us to miss the subtleties of the exhibition and the presentation of his consistently impressive and remarkably erudite work. However, the multi-national production—the Turrell road show—and the scale apparently required for undertaking a retrospective of this living artist must also assume ultimate responsibility for Turrell's trivialising appropriation by younger media stars like Drake. The positive reception of the 60s counter-cultural zeitgeist leads to an administrative dead-end in a government back-office, however, and much of it seems followed by the nose to hashish psychosis and drug-induced paranoia. This is also why Turrell's work may just as surely take us to the networked entrepreneurialism of his contemporaries, like Stuart Brand with his “counter-cultural” cybernetic experiment, the *Whole Earth Catalogue*. The Mendota building that forms the locus of Turrell's career is now a Starbucks.

From *Within/Without*, to observing the observation of viewers inside the perceptual cell, which I hadn't booked in advance to view from inside, the remaining works in the exhibition patiently wait to reveal the singular vision Turrell's model for the artwork has followed since its inception. After the spectacle of the Ganzfeld, based on experimental para-psychology from the mid-century, where a serious trace of Ken Russell's 1980 b-movie *Altered States* remains glued to the work, many of the other works in the show are left to appear as studies. In a very deliberate way, the Ganzfeld, titled *Virtuality Squared*, felt like a sober Ayahuasca ceremony presented by Adolf Loos. The shallow space construction, *Raemar* (1969), and cross corner projections, *Shanta II (Blue)* (1970) and *Joecar (Red)* (1968) are more conventionally reduced as wall works in their respective galleries. Acquired by the NGA for the exhibition, the mounting and display of these works suggest their immanent hostility to presentation as a part of a collection. Often requiring their own rooms, the installations occupy a zone that lies somewhere between a singular cinema and a bodiless but breathing *tableau vivant*. Of greatest interest were the works that mark Turrell's move from the recording of his early experiments with constrained light to the more confident and truly compelling works in the 1970s and 80s. The Peter Blum edition archive—acquired by Alice Pratt Brown Museum endowment fund for Houston Museum of Fine Arts in time for the exhibition—allows the viewer to see the works at the scale of the page, in aquatint, before their selection as mono- and polychromatic installations. The *First Light* series (1989-90) helps to reveal the intentionality of the works into the controlled ambience of the architectural space, and links their production to the Baltic Studio and Taslimi Construction companies, which are responsible for the construction, installation, and realisation of Turrell's work in exhibition.

⁵ Govan, 2013, p. 15.

The *Projection Piece Drawings* (1970-1) and their linking with the installation of works such as *Carn*, *Pullen*, and *Phantom*, also lends a process and editioned register, which suggests the works require demonstration as highly planned and meticulously attended, as if to steer the viewer's consideration away from the carefully integrated lighting and construction of the work and back towards the artist's hand, executing directly from the idea. Photographic prints of the Mendota stoppages further the expressive tone of this undertaking. From there, the Wedgeworks, with their sci-fi sourced LED interiors provide a spaceship hold aesthetic and also, through the use of fibre-optic light, create the deepest aspects of the exhibition. The chambers created for their production of uncanny space, for their extrapolation of the aggressively controlled ambience in the gallery, lead the viewer to a completely other realm. NGA curator Lucina Ward remembers the litigation brought against Turrell when a 'Wedgework' disoriented a gallery-goer to the point of falling into the work's light-only architecture. This potentiality is strongly felt and becomes the intensively maintained limit to the entire exhibition. The constant presence of security as the hawk-eyed attendants looking out for the viewer seems to be an unintended result of the public institution that continually points to the control required throughout the exhibition as (public) space. A concern for your safety briskly manifests into a surveillance game of eluding the watchful eye of the authorities in order to experience the space, if only for a brief moment, entirely to oneself.

Many critics and philosophers have lined-up to heap praise on Turrell's light-interventions. François Laruelle's non-philosophical reading of the work supports a post-ideological purity for perception, whereas George Didi-Huberman's phenomenological renders the importance of encountering colour 'as metaphors of the eye.'⁶ Alongside these two arguments, to be briefly introduced here, I wish to add a third. It is the distributed power of Turrell's productions that demands further examination. What is most obvious is the most complex—there is no distinction between the work and the institutions in which the work appears.

The New York based theorist and commentator Alexander R. Galloway considers the implications of Laruelle's thought and his interest in Turrell's work to be apposite to the philosopher's own theory, particularly the *First Light* editions as exhibited at MoMA in 1990:

No object, no image, no focus—no wonder Laruelle was drawn to *First Light*. It represents the very core principles of the non-standard method. For Laruelle, Turrell's art work poses a basic problem. "Light makes manifest," he acknowledges. "But what will manifest the light?" Systems of representation reveal aspects of the world to perceiving subjects; this is how light makes manifest. But is it possible to see light *in* itself, not in relation to a perceived object? Is it possible to manifest the rigorously immanent genericness of light itself?⁷

⁶ Didi-Huberman, 1999, p. 48.

⁷ Galloway, 2013, p. 230. Galloway is commenting on, and in the process translates, some of the French language essay by Laruelle, "A Light Odyssey: La découverte de la lumière comme problème théorique et esthétique". Laruelle, 1991.

This is the kind of second-order observation necessitated by Turrell's work according to Galloway's mounting of Laruelle's serious, scientific analysis, which seeks to offer a novel approach to perception, one that distinguishes itself from the choice to undertake a philosophical reflection. It attempts to imagine a pre-symbolic universe, one with 'no objects, no image, and no focus,' as Turrell himself says in an interview with Amanda Boetzkes.⁸ The disorienting proposal that is the most consistent result of Turrell's work then, is also the grounds upon which the institutions are inviting the viewer to be subjected. There is of course, already a dangerously vacant ideological gap here, one that can only be filled by the authority of the gallery and proprietors of the works, not least Turrell himself. This is where Turrell's non-objective installations slide almost casually into the realm of sovereign power – the pharaonic chamber of the gallery, without the pharaoh, is the realisation of distributed networks of domination, one that persists almost imperceptibly in our contemporary social organisation – no object, no image, no focus.⁹ A reading such as Laruelle's is pitched, of course, in direct contradistinction to Didi-Huberman's attempt to re-orient the work through a historically grounded phenomenology of perception. Clearly, the work *attempts* a theory of perception – a non-phenomenology of light that presents without support, light as such. But this turns out to be too much hubris for the art historian Didi-Huberman, and hopefully for others, to just uncritically believe in—the 'objective' supports of the gallery are fused as a necessary ground to the works, which attempt to unmoor the architecture from the grid through the use of religious symbolism emptied of all contents. With Turrell's works the light of the sun, however, is always supplemented by the careful and often hidden manipulations of fluorescent and artificial lighting within the installations, not least from inside the very surface of the gallery. Turrell's strategy is to deny this; he sees no distinction to be made between the natural and the artificial lighting. The gallery too expects the viewer to see this as confluent with (human) nature. The work is anything but. This deist aspect of the work and its reception demonstrates its success through its appeal to the institutions that wish to be flooded with light, the lightness of immaterial presence that is simple to install, easy to manage, and readily available for distribution.

Let's be clear, this light-as-such, causes Galloway – via Laruelle – to understand Turrell's attempt to 'unilateralize the paradox and put both light and its radiation into immanent superposition,' as the very foundation of the work. This allows for the somewhat unbelievable conclusion that: 'Such a move defangs the transcendental tendencies added to light by philosophy and reveals a purely immanent light.'¹⁰ Through one simple move, the critical dimension of Turrell's project can evaporate into the dazzling light and secular-religious tenors demonstrated across almost all of the hyperbolic writing that exists on Turrell's work. These admittedly utopian claims originally issue from Turrell himself. Apparently he has found a fire-escape in the sky and left the building. 'The point,' Galloway continues, 'is not to

⁸ Amanda Boetzkes interview with Turrell is cited by Galloway, 2013.

⁹ This argument could be productively compared to Gerhard Richter's remarks on photography and its relation to painting for its significance to the narrative of modernism in the early 1970s: 'There was no style, no composition, no judgement. It liberated me from personal experience. There was nothing but a pure picture [reines Bild].' From an interview with Richter by Rolf Schön, cat. 36th Venice Biennale, German Pavilion, 1972. Gerhard Richter interview cited by Chevrier, note 12, p. 51.

¹⁰ Galloway, 2013, p. 232.

construct bigger and better castles in the sky, transcendental and sufficient for all.’¹¹ The suggestions of a definitive, solipsistic escape, a well-defined ‘non-objective’ exit, are a temporary relief from the difficult prohibitions of the material world. The danger of such a proposal is obvious: it assumes it may leave the world as it is, an endless presence where there is to be nothing new under the sun.

If Jeff Koons, as Jed Perl wrote for the *New York Review of Books*, is ‘a publicist’s artist’, Turrell could be seen similarly, as a subservient practitioner to the industry for modern art, one whose works perfectly reflect the demands of endowments and foundations.¹² It is a signature of the distributed and impossible entanglement of public spectacle with private idealism. While retrospectives are non-controversial for artists who capture and excite their public, which for Koons centres around questions of marketability, Turrell’s pretense is a stylistic trademark on the skylit frame constructed around our persistent and timeless fascination with the perceptual effects of light. In many ways this is a legitimate project but it also has an element of illusion: its untarnished run from the muck of industrial effluence and capital excess. As such, whether the vocational subordination of the artist to their patrons is a critique of the work or not is in actuality directed to the question of whether Turrell can endure the mountains of hyperbolic praise that threaten to bury the monumental scale of his productions. One strategy he has consistently relied on is to go bigger, from the ‘Ganzfeld’ to the ‘Skyspace’ to his intervention into the ‘geologic time’ of the Roden Crater in Northern Arizona. Even if the minimalist-inversion—reconceived here as maximalist—refines the resolved-at-inception spatial aesthetics common to modernist ecstasies, it cannot transcend the threat of co-option only by matching its resilient form of negotiation with the built-in kitsch of fluoro and the silent majesty of large-scale architecture. Turrell’s use of light’s apparent immateriality and his immersive, calculated works resolve to soak the spectator in pure light — light that the body ‘drinks in’ subconsciously, all the while maintaining this weight of expected perceptual exhaustion by returning the viewer again and again to the point of drowning, reviving them after this baptism back to the relatively banal post-medium shell of the white-cube gallery space. The seamlessly transitional quality of his work is found again in the indeterminacies that appear between the existing gallery architecture and the works’ often masked incursion into the receptive, distributed spaces of massive institutions, in Canberra it is AGLActew, the power provider and the Forrest Hotel & Apartments selling package deals throughout the duration of the exhibition’s spectacle. They’ll even throw in a bottle of wine.

Inside *Within/Without* cracks have appeared at the rim of the oculus. An insect is trapped by a spider’s web nesting in the work. Finally, it is the distributive power of the staging that means that one co-ordinated exhibition catalogue can be produced for the show for all five locations of the tour, even though they appear across three different countries and as many continents. It remains — regardless of the specific contexts for the mounting of the exhibition — an acceptable accompaniment to a survey of a canonised artist’s oeuvre on a global scale, even if it is one without object, image, or focus. The feeling that the same works are showing concurrently, serially installed like beacons of the global art-world leaves a slightly unsettling sense of the

¹¹ Galloway, 2013, p. 235.

¹² Perl, 2014.

role Turrell may play in maintaining our eyes and minds on North American hegemony in large-scale modern art. This may appear to be a successful form for holding off the competition against monumental rivals such as Anish Kapoor or more recently the Andy Warhol / Ai Weiwei show at Melbourne's National Gallery of Victoria (NGV).

Retrospectively the Turrell show was relatively poorly attended, the *Sydney Morning Herald* blaming it for a slump of more than 57 per cent in total revenue from the sale of entrance fees to the public gallery in 2014-5. Meanwhile at the NGV in Melbourne the Warhol / Weiwei exhibition broke records for summer attendance figures, helping the gallery to rank alongside the Centre Pompidou in Paris and Museum of Modern Art, New York for visitor figures. This is not to compare the galleries directly, Canberra is a relatively isolated city that serves as the centre of governmental, not cultural life in Australia, so whether *James Turrell: A Retrospective* amounts to another example of 'soft' cultural diplomacy or a genuine lack of enthusiasm for mounting challenging exhibitions at the NGA, it felt mostly like an extravagance. The sensuous indulgence was intoxicating, even while the populism required more and more of publicly funded institutions faded, only to reappear on the screens of music fans and social media streams. In an Australian context Turrell's work ultimately offered itself as an index of the demands of distributed power, the model of the contemporary elite—a spectacle which approaches the perfectly ideological belief in dematerialised capital without an image and its accompanying administration. Pure colour may bounce off the walls or even evaporate the senses that bind our everyday reality by mounting a new divinity cleansed of the burden of meaning. By enrapturing the conditioned collective conscious into flat prostration, the public and its administration can become a thing of the past:

I'd be very interested to see Washington, D.C., emptied of use. What a space. Long lawns. Huge spires. A big house with a giant man sitting inside it. And you go into these big chambers. It would be pretty terrific (and actually the United States would work just as well, if not better)

- James Turrell, *Sensing Space* (1992)

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