

White Cube and Black Box: Irwin, Turrell, and the return of the subject to art and psychology in the 1960s

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Abstract

This paper addresses the influence of developments arising in the field of psychology on American artistic practice in the 1960s and early 1970s, with important ramifications for how aesthetic experience is represented and understood. By the period in question, psychological behaviourism's emphasis on what can only be externally observed had relegated subjective experience to an inscrutable (epiphenomenal) "black box," but experimental and environmental psychology re-opened subjectivity to scientific scrutiny.

For a number of Southern California artists who began to experiment with creating art that relied heavily upon the methods and principles of experimental psychology, these developments had important implications. James Turrell and Robert Irwin (along with fellow light and space artists) experimented with the nature of perception, creating situations (rather than objects) that tested the legitimacy of human observation as reliable "truth." Often, this work was installed in enclosed rooms or pods, was disorienting and closely resembled experiments in sensory deprivation; in a famous case, the artists performed a number of sensory experiments in UCLA's anechoic chamber, a soundproof chamber that, with the lights off, almost completely deadened external stimuli, leaving the participant to perceive nothing more than her own perceptions (and, at times, hallucinations). It also incorporated simple illusions commonly used in perception experiments: James Turrell's early projection works are complex iterations of the famous "Necker Cube," a line drawing that demonstrates to subjects the oscillating nature of perceptual interpretation. Rather than relying upon observed behaviour as their data, these artists were interested in the nature of experience and were frequently subjects in their own experiments. In each of these situations, the viewer was encouraged (if not physically required) to take on a position of scepticism or, as Robert Irwin puts it, "rigorous wonder." The art became a laboratory of uncertainties.

For Irwin and Turrell, the development of a "phenomenal art" was an opportunity to explore the physical properties of aesthetic experience. In the 1960s, experimental psychologists such as Gerald Mandler and J.J. Gibson sought a means of incorporating experience into their studies (effectively rejecting the behaviourist approach), averting both behaviourism and the idiosyncrasies of psychoanalysis. Today, cognitive scientists who see consciousness in phenomenological (in contrast to epiphenomenal) terms include such notables as Bernard Baars (contrastive phenomenology), Francisco Varela (naturalized phenomenology) or Thomas Metzinger (self as process). The work of these scientists contributes to a deeper understanding of what exactly is being represented in installation art that takes perceptual experimentation as its medium.

I argue that the viewer's involvement in the situation (with or without an object per se) is the material, contingent core of the work of art, bringing into question the perceived neutrality of the high modern "white cube." Their work is therefore a challenge to modernist criticism that prevailed in the mid-1960s, such as that of Michael Fried, who dismissed such contingencies as "theatrical" and therefore "non-art." At the same time, artists such as Irwin and Turrell expanded upon the work of experimental psychologists by bringing it into the gallery. Phenomenal art

simultaneously challenges the opacity of the black box and neutrality of the white cube by making consciousness its medium.

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