

James Turrell: A Dissent—Part Two: Four Thoughts on James Turrell, or Where is the Body? By Maya Gurantz

by [Geoff Tuck](#) | Apr 16, 2014 | [Contributors](#), [Maya Gurantz](#), [Reviews](#) | [1 comment](#)

1. Look

While the Light and Space artists of the 1970s have occasionally been historicized as “California Minimalism,” Turrell’s recent retrospective at LACMA exposed the gap between the two practices. The West Coast artists manipulated light, space, surfaces, finish. East Coast Minimalism explicitly considered the body. It developed in intimate conversation with post-modern dance. Robert Morris wrote about the art object as being scaled to the human body: no longer a monument looming over the viewer nor the intricate ornament glimmering in her hand. This human scale shifted the site of the artwork to what passes *between* the body and the object.

Despite the experiential and phenomenological nature of Turrell’s work, in his realm, the body is vestigial.

Each piece maintains an ideal viewing position, usually seated. The viewer is meant to sit on the chair or bench—and look, and look, and look. The light installations with their layered, textural beauty become living, trembling color field paintings. The visual information vibrates between the eye and perceiving brain without ever once passing through the body. The body becomes the eye.

Not only is the body unnecessary, it is actively interruptive, destructive. A security guard cautioned me *not to get my shadow* on one of the works. The staging of disembodied visual pleasure falls apart the moment another viewer’s body enters the frame of vision or, God forbid, speaks. This in turn instills feelings of contempt within the viewer for the bodies and voices of fellow museum-goers: how dare these humans ruin my looking?

We are not meant to acknowledge the existence of bodies. Nor be in our own body. We are not meant to speak. We are not meant to experience the work in relation to each other. We are meant to shut up and look and look and look. In this contempt for the viewer’s body, the Turrell show ultimately felt like an insidiously isolating spectacle.

Decades after his work was first made, it doesn't surprise me that it is being celebrated in our brave new technological era. We often engage with technology as a portal by which we can unplug from our bodies into the rhetoric of virtual reality—even though our bodies, fingers, faces are right there engaging with machines made of metal and plastic and glass and pixels. We are increasingly alienated from even the notion that these smooth, seamless objects are fabricated at all, *made* by human hands. The machines' very design masks the immense physical labor of their production—mining, chemicals, factory production, human assembly—and the outsized physical consequences of that production: Superfund sites, e-waste mountains.

I'm reminded of friend who works in high tech who said to me, "I don't like to think about the inside of my body. I like to pretend that if I cut my body in half, it would be like a potato." White. Clean. Like an iPhone. Like a Turrell installation.

2. Head in a Jar

During the show, I had a memory.

I once found myself at Burning Man in the company of former Microsoft software developers who had all cashed out to live a life of leisure, psycho-pharmaceuticals and polyamory.

I noticed something about their lifestyle: for all their hedonism, underneath was a disquieting idealism that rejected the body. They studied "Transhumanism"—a futurist subculture that focuses on how technology can transform the limits the fragile, aging human experience. With better living through science, perhaps we may experience consciousness eternally—maybe with our bodies cryogenically frozen, or our head in a jar somewhere.

This yearning extended to their travels through psychedelia. One guy related his fantastic experience with a synthetic enthiogen which apparently separates the mind from the body's actions —his brain wandered the milky way while unbeknownst to him, his body was vomiting down below. This didn't sound pleasurable to me. It sounded terrifying.

To separate consciousness from the body—is to deem the body in its failings, its noise, as a banal anchor to the world subject to its very temporality—and ultimately unnecessary.

3. Race and Expertise

The Turrell retrospective clearly required work; in its curation and intensive installation, obviously, but also in terms of the security necessary for the show to run smoothly. As such, the show unwittingly exposed LACMA's retrograde positions on race and class. And no one yet appears to have talked about it.

I did not purchase one of the \$75 tickets required to experience the 12 minutes of *Light Reignfall*, one of Turrell's "perceptual cells" and the penultimate piece in the show. In it, a viewer lies down on a padded stretcher and is then rolled, cadaver-like, into a large, welded-metal sphere for his or her own private light show that triggers the brain to create its own experiences. The viewer as head-in-a-jar, writ large. The viewer selects a "hard" or "soft" experience, depending on how much he or she wants his or her mind blown.

Light Reignfall is next to *Breathing Light*, an elevated room accessed by a flight of stairs. Within the room, a giant soft light box with curved walls, one feels suspended (as long as the other viewers stay quiet and out of your field of vision), lit by LEDs that slowly change hue, centered on a rectangular cut-out that itself feels suspended and transforms with the light's transformations.

Only seven people get to experience the room at a time. No shoes are allowed. LACMA Security guards, mostly African American and Latino, enforce these rules: making sure all viewers remove their shoes, put disposable booties over their feet, leave their bags in cubbies, access the piece at the correct moment—and most importantly, don't use their cameras. Another security guard stands inside the piece to make sure bedazzled viewers don't fall into the gap of the cut-out at front. The viewers at the bottom of the stairs vibrate impatience; the viewers within *Breathing Light* feel the stopwatch of the next round of waiting watchers, and frankly, managing all us plebes into the ideal dictated viewing experience seemed like fairly active and stressful work.

Twenty feet away at the perceptual cell, we encounter an entirely different performance of labor. Well-heeled ticket holders lounge on black leather couches by the work, assured of their scheduled entry. And strangely, the piece is operated not by the same security guards next door tasked with booties and cameras, the guys telling me not to get my shadow on the work—but by a trio of young white women, little culture buds you'd expect to see at a gallery front desk, taking turns pressing buttons on a touch-screen console. These women all wear white lab coats. I do not believe any of them are scientists.

The software looks simple—an explicitly graphical interface with big squares for the three functions it appears to operate: roll the viewer in and out; provide the viewer with hard or soft; and finally, a giant emergency stop and eject in case the viewer gets wigged out. That's it. Anyone with a few minutes training could run it.

So why couldn't the same security guards operate *Light Reignfall*? Because, obviously, LACMA was pandering to the racial and class anxieties of the viewers who paid good cash money to experience something scientific, technological, transformative—but above all, separate. These viewers wanted special access to the VIP room of the art club, and dammit, they wanted art girls to facilitate it.

4. The Old Men and the Sky

The final room of LACMA's retrospective was not surprisingly devoted to *Roden Crater*, Turrell's immense earthwork located in an extinct volcano in Arizona.

In 2011, I went on a road trip curated by Catherine Lord, touring Land Art of the American Southwest. Several older men have put their bodies smack in the middle of endless massive projects out in the desert. And decades after they were initiated, neither Charlie Ross' *Star Axis* nor *The Hill* by James McGee, neither Michael Heizer's *City* nor James Turrell's *Roden Crater* are completed or open to the public (we gained privileged access to the former two, and weren't allowed into the latter).

One of our group said the pieces will never be completed because once they are, they must join the discourse of art—to be seen, critiqued, taken apart, and experienced—and the artists' egos simply can't take it. The inflated rhetoric around the work exposes this anxiety—the artists appear to require the works to be regarded as so awesome they cannot be debated at the level of mere art, much as Jews are not allowed to write G-d's full name.

Roden Crater, in particular, appears to be a project with no ending in sight—after 35 years, only six of its proposed 20 chambers have been completed. He is fundraising for the next phase. In some ways, I can sympathize with this—the project took longer and cost more than Turrell thought it would. It always does. As Turrell worked, his big ideas only got bigger. Ideas often do.

And yet.

Perhaps I am comparing apples to oranges, but I recently binge-read my way through Robert

Caro's magisterial *Years of Lyndon Johnson*. This biography originally was meant to take three volumes and now, after almost 40 years and 3600 pages, Caro is finally waist-deep into completing the fifth and final book.

Caro and Turrell *et al.* share a generational trajectory and multi-decade commitment to a monumental defining "life's work." The product of Caro's labor, however, fills me with reverence in a way that Turrell does not—ironically because Caro, unlike Turrell, does not demand my reverence. As a historian of the ways power operated in 20th century America, Caro's work provides endless revelations of our flawed, yearning—and above all, *shared*—humanity.

Whereas Turrell—and Ross and McGee and Heizer—have ultimately only built mausoleums for themselves. Like the pyramids of Egypt, or Qin Shi Huangdi's terra cotta army.

We are meant to remember the king, not the civilization. The king, not the labor that made such feats of engineering possible. We are not meant to have our own humanity revealed to us, but to feel our own smallness by men who have poured millions of other people's dollars into the earth to create mega-monuments that point our eyes skyward.

And because in our time the king is no longer God's instrument, the artistic genius ultimately becomes God himself and we are meant to genuflect before him. I decline.

The harsh desperate landscape is echoed in the Land Artists' own desperate aging, their bodies and their works exposed to the forces of the sun, the wind, the dry air—exposed and stripped by the mighty inexorability of Time. I am left seeing not the awesomeness of *Roden Crater* itself, but what it reveals—the outsized power that can be harnessed by a male artist's yearning for remembrance against his fear of death—the ultimately very human, very fragile desire to transmute the body to eternity.

Please see [James Turrell: A Dissent—Part One: Refreshed and Energized: Installation, Subjectivity and the Spa Experience](#) by Maura Brewer

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1 Comment

Danielle McCullough on April 17, 2014, at 10:17 am

Thank you Maya! This is also a great critique of the organized religion, the oxygen chamber, the cryogenic facility that is the American museum. Our culture is so caught up in death denying that it totally spills into our institutional treatments of precious objects - and non-precious persons. The death/bodily harm of un-precious persons is no more relevant than turds that must be flushed down super hygienic toilets – the institution does not want to see the stains of their hands, no sneezing and farting in the light chamber!

I have likewise been preoccupied with this problem, being part of a workforce that is treated like bodiless robots out of reverence to the archive. Our climate control system is for the safety of computers not