

“At the threshold, the crossing of silence and light, lies the sanctuary of art, the only language of man. It is the treasury of the shadows. Whatever is made of light casts a shadow. Our work is of shadow; it belongs to light”.

Louis I. Kahn, 1971¹

JAMES TURRELL: SILENCE AND LIGHT

ANA MARIA TORRES, 2005

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Upon entering any of the artworks of the artist James Turrell, one's first impression is of exquisite blankness. The atmosphere is subdued and silent. The space holds an inexplicable power to calm and soothe. We have entered the world of light; our eyes blink at this dreamlike luminescence. You are “feeling with your eyes,” the artist explains; the feeling is of a vision covered by mist. No words can describe this sensation as one sits in the penumbra of Turrell's light pieces.

In his work Turrell awakens something that is being forgotten—the quality of light in the world of penumbra. This is a delight in shadows that one finds in the history of art and in traditional architecture in which the search for beauty lies not in the thing itself but in the glow of light adhering to the surface of a wall. Have you not sensed in yourself the lacking of mystery and tranquility in the ordinary light that we place in our architecture today? Our modern brightly lighted spaces with shiny walls seem vulgar in comparison to the somber and dignified spaces that one can find in traditional architecture. The architect Louis I. Kahn shared Turrell's understanding of light as a material. Kahn described light as “material life,” as architecture that, like us, cannot exist without light. Kahn, like Turrell, reflected in his work this strong conviction of “light as the giver of all presences, and

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The Room, the Street, and Human Agreement (1971) speech Kahn gave in Detroit when he accepted the American Institute of Architects Gold Medal for lifetime achievement. Twombly, Robert. Ed. *Louis Kahn. Essential texts*. W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., New York, 2003, p. 259.

material as spent light,”² However, the artist and the architect approach light and shadow from different perspectives. Kahn used to say that the “story of light in architecture came from the opening in a wall.” As in Greek architecture that emerges from silence and light, “the Parthenon light is the space between the columns—a rhythm of light, no-light, light, no-light,” explained Louis Kahn in his speech accepting the American Institute of Architects Gold Medal. Turrell’s artwork is closer to the sensitivity of traditional Japanese architecture, where penumbra and darkness cause beauty rather than displeasure. It is a culture where darkness has always occupied the collective fantasies of its people. Junichir Tanizaki writes in *In Praise of Shadows*, “In making for ourselves a place to live, we first spread a parasol to throw a shadow on the earth, and in the pale light of the shadow we put together a house.”

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In Turrell’s light spaces, like in traditional architecture, we immerse ourselves in the darkness to discover its own particular beauty. He uses different aspects of light to arouse diverse feelings in the viewer—“To see light as we generally don’t see it with the eyes open,” says Turrell. The tone, the density of light, varies from piece to piece. The different qualities of how light inhabits space, a distinction that also seems to exist in the mood of the viewer, becomes apparent as one walks through Turrell’s light pieces. The relationships between the pieces strengthen their individual uniqueness. All together his works are “exploring a new territory of thought, a new continent of vision,” explained Turrell in a conversation. Every surface has the ability to awaken and stimulate us. If we are willing to patiently wait for our eyes to adjust to the dim light, we rouse our minds.

Turrell creates a space with plain walls, so that the light drawn into it forms dim shadows within emptiness. The walls and backgrounds of the space become interrelated. We are overcome with the feeling that the space could revert into a mere void. Turrell brings the visual and emotional experience of the soft luminosity of the outside through the apertures of his *Skypaces* by using just the right balance of darkness between the outside and the inside of the space. We never tire of the act of seeing in Turrell’s work; the dim light far surpasses any ornament.

There could not be a better place to delight in the pleasure of seeing the moonlight, or to enjoy any of those heart warming moments that mark the changes of the seasons, than Turrell’s *Roden Crater* in Flagstaff, Arizona. Surrounded by tranquility, one looks up through the crater to the sky. At the Roden Crater the

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Silence and Light
(1968–69), LIK Lectures.
Twombly, Robert. Ed.
*Louis Kahn. Essential
texts.* W.W. Norton &
Company, Inc.,
New York, 2003, p. 229.

chambers are bathed in light. You realize then that only in dim half-light is the true beauty of the universe revealed.

Turrell's light pieces silently efface themselves, so we are drawn into ourselves to better contemplate our own existence. They are the place of mind where our perceptual habits break. Kahn used to say, "The beautiful in the material is transformed from wonder to knowing which in turn is transformed to the expression of beauty that lies in the desire to express."³ Each work becomes a room. Enter this room and you discover how personal it is, how much you feel its life. When there are more people the work, the room, loses its intimacy. We lose the possibility to savor the secrets of shadows.

From Turrell's work we take back with us a sort of knowledge. This knowledge cannot be passed to another person, because it is not an event that repeats itself. This experience cannot be communicated; its singularity is so sensitive that the act of looking at Turrell's work becomes an intimate act of seeing.

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(pages 155–163)
Unseen, Blue, 2002,
Skyspace, 6 vues
intérieures / 6 interior
views

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Silence and Light
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