

II.

Robert Irwin responded to Dia's invitation to make an exhibition in its facility at 548 West 22nd Street with a proposal for a two-part, site-determined installation. *Prologue: x18³* opened April 12, 1998, and closed June 14, 1998. *Excursus: Homage to the Square³* will be presented from September 13, 1998, through June 13, 1999.

Irwin selected the third floor of the converted warehouse to capitalize on the extensive natural light that illuminates this space from both the front and back of the building. Originally proposing a work that, in its first part, would draw exclusively on daylight, the veteran Californian artist later modified his initial conception during the course of its realization to incorporate electric light into each of the eighteen cubic chambers comprising the installation. *Prologue: x18³* heightened and refined the viewer's apprehension of the site by the subtle interplay between his three modes of intervention: the chambers made of scrim, whose configuration and openings were determined by the beam structure of the ceiling and the disposition of the columns; the grid of fluorescent lights positioned on the fabric walls on the north-south axis; and the gels on the windows, which delicately modified and filtered the natural light. The interaction of these different but interrelated elements in the site (whose physical and structural irregularity and quirkiness revealed itself only gradually and differently under variable weather conditions) honed the spectator's scrutiny, refining recognition that one's experience will be governed as much by time as by space, by contingency as by circumstance, by change as much as by that which is given.

Excursus: Homage to the Square³ builds on this intense, phenomenologically based engagement, while shifting the focus subtly from the locus, the site in its widest sense, in order to create a more hermetic situation in which color becomes the principal agent: light is now materialized hue. To effect this reorientation, Irwin placed a pair of fluorescent lights on every scrim, illuminating each bay differently by means of a singular tonal and color combination. He also imprinted a barely discernible band of a slightly darker tone on every scrim at eye-height and correspondingly modified the gels on the windows. In addition, he moved the point of entry to the center of the room by introducing a door midway along the west wall of the installation.

As indicated in the title, in this second part Irwin extends into three, or even four, dimensions the investigation into color and color relationships that was the focus of a series of abstract paintings by Joseph Albers, which create optical space through a refined juxtaposition of closely related, barely familiar, yet highly particular tertiary hues. It indicates, too, that for all its apparent distance from more conventional genres, Irwin's work maintains a telling connection with the central traditions of twentieth-century art.

notes

The artist has altered certain quotations from the original.

1. Robert Irwin, "The State of the Real, Part 1," conversation with Jan Butterfield, *Arts* 46, no. 10 (June 1972), p. 48.
2. Robert Irwin, "Reshaping the Shape of Things, Part 2," *Arts* 47, no. 1 (September–October 1972), p. 32.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 30.
4. Robert Irwin, quoted in *A Report on the Art and Technology Program of the Los Angeles County Museum, 1967–1971*, ed. Maurice Tuchman (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1971), p. 131.
5. Robert Irwin, interview by Frederick S. Wight, in *Transparency, Reflection, Light, Space: Four Artists* (Los Angeles: UCLA Art Galleries, 1971), p. 88.
6. Robert Irwin, Cullinan Lectures, Rice University, 1978–88.
7. Irwin, "The State of the Real," p. 48.
8. Irwin, "Reshaping the Shape of Things," p. 32.
9. Robert Irwin, quoted in *Projects for Philadelphia College of Art: Anne Healy, Patrick Ireland, Robert Irwin, Charles Simonds* (Philadelphia: Philadelphia College of Art, 1976), p. 26.
10. Robert Irwin, interview by Alistair Mackintosh, *Art and Artists* 6 (March 1972), pp. 25, 27.
11. Irwin, "The State of the Real," p. 49.
12. Irwin, Cullinan Lectures.
13. Robert Irwin, interview by Wight, p. 88.
14. Irwin, quoted in *Projects for Philadelphia College of Art*, p. 20.
15. Irwin, interview by Mackintosh, pp. 24–27.
16. Robert Irwin, quoted in Jan Butterfield, *Robert Irwin: The Art of Light and Space* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1993), p. 63.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 51.
18. Robert Irwin, John Hill Professorship Lectures, University of Minnesota, 1981.
19. Robert Irwin, Watts Lecture, San Francisco Museum of Art, 1998.
20. Robert Irwin, interview by Wight, p. 96.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 96.
22. *Ibid.*, p. 98.

selected bibliography

Irwin, Robert. *Being and Circumstance: Notes Towards a Conditional Art*.

Larkspur Landing, Calif.: Lapis Press, 1985.

Robert Irwin. New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1977.

Robert Irwin. Los Angeles: The Museum of Contemporary Art, 1993.

Wechsler, Lawrence. *Seeing Is Forgetting the Name of the Thing One Sees: A Life of Contemporary Artist Robert Irwin*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982.

Robert Irwin was born in Long Beach, California, in 1928, and studied at the Otis Art Institute (1948–50), Jepson Art Institute (1951), and Chinouard Art Institute (1952–54). Since his first solo exhibition in 1957, he has exhibited widely in galleries and museums in North America and abroad. In 1984 Irwin received a MacArthur Fellowship. In 1993 the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles initiated a major retrospective of his work, which subsequently traveled to Paris, Madrid, and Cologne. Among his numerous public projects, the most recent is the monumental garden he designed for the Getty Center in Los Angeles, which opened in 1997. He currently lives and works in San Diego.

Major funding for this exhibition is being provided by the Lannan Foundation, with additional generous support from Ellen and Max Palevsky, the Richard Florsheim Art Fund, Fondazione Prada and the members of the Dia Art Council.

Robert Irwin

Part I: Prologue: x18³

Part II: Excursus: Homage to the Square³



Dia center for the arts

548 west 22nd street new york city

Part I: April 12, 1998–June 14, 1998

Part II: September 13, 1998–June 13, 1999

Robert Irwin

I.
To be an artist is not a matter of making paintings or objects at all. What we are really dealing with is our state of consciousness and the shape of our perception.¹

The act of art is a tool for extended consciousness.²

The act of art has turned to a direct examination of our perceptual processes.³

We have chosen that experience out of the realm of experiences to be defined as "art," because having this label it is given special attention. Perhaps this is all "art" means—this Frame of Mind.⁴

If that state of consciousness I keep talking about became, in a sense, the consciousness of society as a whole, if we really thought in those terms, and were really that aware, . . . really that sense-sophisticated, then our art would be an integral part of our society, and the artist as a separate discipline or art as a separate event would not exist.⁵

Perhaps the future role of the artist will be to act directly as the arbiter of qualities in our lives. Quality not as an add-on, as it is now, but as criteria in all matters of planning.⁶

Any tool you use is legitimate. The key to the tool is whether it has the dimensions to deal with what have become your questions. I consider art as a thought form more than anything else.⁷

My art has never been about ideas. . . . My interest in art has never been about abstraction; it has always been about experience. . . . My pieces were never meant to be dealt with intellectually as ideas, but to be considered experientially.⁸

There is an essential kind of knowing, which comes from a purely phenomenological basis.⁹

What I would like to do is to make you aware that you see and that, by not being able to prejudice the situation, you suddenly become party to an entirely different structure of the state of the real. It's you that does it, not me. So it can't really manifest itself as an idea, or an object, or an event because any of these things becomes distracting and at least in part about itself.¹⁰

The thing is to maximize the physicality while minimizing the imagery. . . . Physicality is not transferable abstractly: the only way that you can deal with it is by being in its presence. That was the beginning of all this.¹¹

Qualities exist only as long as a perceiving individual keeps them in play.¹²

The relationship between art and the viewer is all firsthand *now* experience and there is no way it can be carried to you through any kind of secondary system [such as art criticism].¹³

When I do something in a museum or gallery situation, I feel I have to take on the role of an interactor. Since it's a cultural institution, it's a cultural activity. To pretend it's anything other than that, is somehow not to pay attention. The degree of control I want in such a situation is essentially absolute. I'm not interested in whether the museum has an opinion on how the situation is to be concluded. I don't think there's anyone who knows as much about what I do as myself and there's nobody who is more conscientious about it than I am. Yet at the same time, strangely enough, I find myself listening to everybody.¹⁴

What I have done has always been about the same single line of inquiry, but all of the means, methods, and positions I've taken have changed radically.¹⁵

In the studio you may reference nature but you also reference all art. The big shift for me is that my art practice is now not so much referenced art historically as it is conditionally. When I confront a space with its specific set of conditions, I try to take into account everything bearing on it. For example, a sense of scale is not only in and of itself but is equally conditioned by where you arrive from—the scale of the New York subway or the big sky country of Montana. I try to take all of this into account.¹⁶

The sculptural response draws all of its cues (reasons for being) from its surroundings. This requires the process to begin with an intimate, hands-on reading of the site. This means sitting, watching, and walking through the site, the surrounding areas (where you will enter from and exit to), the city at large or the countryside. Here there are numerous things to consider: What is the site's relation to applied and implied schemes of organization and systems of order, relation, architecture, use, distance, sense of scale? . . . What is the physical and people density, the sound and visual density (quiet, next-to-quiet, or busy?) What are the qualities of surface, sound, movement, light, etc.? What are the qualities of detail, levels of finish, craft? What are the histories of prior or current

usage, present desires, etc.? A quiet distillation of all this—while directly experiencing the site—determines all the facets of the "sculptural response": aesthetic sensibility, levels and kinds of physicality, gesture, dimensions, materials, kind and level of finish, details, etc.; whether the response should be monumental or ephemeral, aggressive or gentle, useful or useless, sculptural, architectural, or simply the planting of a tree—or maybe even doing nothing at all.¹⁷

In the realm of the phenomenal, "less is more" only when less is the sum total of more.¹⁸

The idea that an "old sculptural response" is the offending turd in the plaza is as wrongminded as conceptualists saying "Painting is dead." On the contrary, in a conditional world, on occasion a cannon on the front lawn maybe the appropriate response.¹⁹

Light has good physical properties for the question . . . of the substance of existence. . . . One of the things that I like about light especially is the degree of its actual physical energy and the minimalness of the identity: as bit information, it has almost none, and yet it has a very, very elaborate, very compound physicality to it. It is a terrific medium for the problem right now.²⁰

What I want is the quality of light, its energy, its existence as matter. I don't want the light bulb. Now, if I have to have the light bulb as imagery, I must have the physicality compounded enough to override the presence of the light bulb in terms of its identity. So a lot of my craft now is in terms of just that, I mean, trying to keep that balance in my favor. Every element that I use is worked and reworked to get it to have the maximum of that physicality and a minimum of that kind of extraneous light bulb imagery.²¹

If light is the medium and space is the medium, then, in a sense, the universe is a medium. I know the impracticality of it right now but when I say that the medium is the universe, that maybe the world is an art form, then the gardening of our universe or our consciousness would be the level of our art participation. . . . That's the reason for my participation in some other activities.²²

—Robert Irwin

Prologue: x 18³

April 12, 1998–June 14, 1998

Prologue: x 18³ is the first in a two-part, site-specific exhibition devised by Californian artist Robert Irwin for Dia's facility at 548 West 22nd Street, New York. The second part, *Excursus: Homage to the Square³*, will be shown from September 10, 1998, through June 13, 1999.

Irwin selected the third floor for his installation to capitalize on the extensive natural light that illuminates this floor from both the front and back of the building. Originally proposing an installation that, in its first part, would draw exclusively on daylight, Irwin then modified and developed his initial conception during the course of its realization to incorporate electric light into each of the eighteen cubic chambers constituting the installation.

"Seeing is forgetting the name of the thing one sees," Irwin has stated in a much-quoted comment. Perception, as both a phenomenological experience and an act, lies at the core of his practice, which spans more than thirty years. In *Prologue: x 18³*, as in much of his previous work, Irwin seeks to heighten and refine the viewer's apprehension of a situation, honing understanding through close scrutiny of the specifics of the site, its context, space, light, and formal qualities.

Born in 1928 in Long Beach, Irwin studied at the Otis Art Institute (1948–50), Jepson Art Institute (1951), and Chouinard Art Institute (1952–54). Since 1957, he has taught widely and lectured extensively throughout the United States. In 1984 he received a MacArthur Fellowship. He currently lives and works in San Diego.

Following his first solo exhibition in 1957, Irwin has shown continuously in the United States and abroad, and has also undertaken various public projects. In 1993, the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles initiated a major retrospective of his work which subsequently traveled to Paris, Madrid, and Cologne. His most recent public project, the monumental garden designed for the Getty Center in Los Angeles, opened in 1997.

Further Reading

Robert Irwin. *Being and Circumstance: Notes Toward a Conditional Art*. Larkspur Landing, Calif.: Lapis Press, 1985.

Lawrence Wechsler. *Seeing is Forgetting the Name of the Thing One Sees: A Life of Contemporary Artist Robert Irwin*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982.

Robert Irwin. Los Angeles: The Museum of Contemporary Art, 1983.