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: x18 opened April 12, 1998, and closed June 14, 1998. Excursus: Homage to the Square 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: x18 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 regularity and quickness 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 Square 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.
3. Ibid., p. 30.
8. Ibid., “Realigning the Shape of Things,” p. 32.
12. Irwin, Larkspur Lectures.
13. Robert Irwin, interview by Night, p. 89.
15. Ibid., interview by Mackintosh, pp. 24–25.
17. Ibid., p. 51.
21. Ibid., p. 96.
22. Ibid., p. 96.

selected bibliography
Robert Irwin was born in Long Beach, California, in 1928, and studied at the Otis Art Institute (1949–50), Jepson Art Institute (1951), and Chinouard Art Institute (1952–54). Since his first solo exhibition in 1967, 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 Paley, the Richard Rierson Art Fund, Fondazione Prada and the members of the Dia Art Council.

Dia center for the arts
548 west 22nd street new york city
Part II: September 13, 1998–June 13, 1999
Robert Irwin

The thing is to maximize the physically while minimizing the imagery. . . . Physically 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.  
Qualities exist only as long as a perceiving individual keeps them in play.

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

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.

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.

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.

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.

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 experimentally.

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

What I would like to do is to make you aware that you see and that, by not being able to prejudge the situation, you suddenly become part to an entirely different structure of the state of the raw. 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.
Prologue: x 18
April 12, 1998–June 14, 1998

Prologue: x 18 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 Square, 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 18, 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

