

TRANSCENDENTAL INSTALLATIONS: ROBERT IRWIN (WORKS BETWEEN 1964-1980)

by Gabriel Perri Silberblatt

Ralph Waldo Emerson's essay "The Poet" and its companion piece, "Experience," represent what Richard Lee Francis calls the philosopher's "final realization of [his] vocational quest," which is, the role of "the poet."¹ Predictably of Emerson, the method of the poet is not easily understood, "the breadth of the problem is great." Still, Emerson elevates this role above all others: "The poet is the sayers, the namer, and represents Beauty."² By way of *examples* of such mythic "poets," Emerson offers a handful of epic rhapsodists of ancient history, yet we yearn for a living-breathing representative. Surprisingly, in the life and work of the radical American conceptual installation artist, Robert Irwin (1928—), we find a remarkable and unselfconscious manifestation of an ideal Emersonian "poet." In a way that is distinctly Emersonian, Irwin's pursuit of "phenomenal" art is wholly dedicated to redefining the observer's *experience* of reality by engaging the very method of what he calls "perceptual knowing."³ Examining Irwin's artistic and philosophical inquiries in terms of the great American thinker will provide not only a better understanding of the elusive conceptual artist, but a more tangible grasp of what it means to be a Transcendental poet, an artist, a sayers.

As is so often true for Emerson, defining a term such as "poet" necessitates a redefinition. "The Poet" and "Experience" methodically empty the word of its acculturated significations in order to clear a way for Emerson's expansive and nuanced understanding of "the sayers." Of course, the method of the poet and his art (i.e. the description of "experience") is dependent on that of Nature, for it is the singular capacity of this artist to be in *sympathy* with the laws of Nature that enable his Genius.

Before approaching the role of Emerson's poet, it is important to establish some of the philosophical ground on which this "lover of beauty" stands. One of the most fundamental ideas here is the distinction between an ideal and a material conception of Nature. As it is most famously expounded in his essay "Nature," Emerson's idealism challenges the preeminence that the physical "facts" of nature tend to hold for us. "There seems," Emerson writes,

to be a necessity in spirit to manifest itself in *material forms*; and day and night, river and storm, beast and bird, acid and alkali, *preëxist* in necessary *Ideas* in the mind of God, and are what they are by virtue of preceding affections, in the world of spirit. A fact is the end or last issue of the spirit. The visible creation is the *terminus* or the circumference of the invisible world.⁴

¹ Richard L. Francis, "The Poet and Experience," in *Emerson Centenary Essays*, ed. Joel Myerson (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1982), 94.

² Ralph Waldo Emerson, "The Poet" in *Emerson's Prose and Poetry*, ed. Joel Porte and Sandra Morris (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2001), 184-85. (All subsequent references to Emerson's essays come from this edition).

³ Robert Irwin, *Being and Circumstance: Notes Toward a Conditional Art* (Larkspur Landing, Calif: Lapis Press in conjunction with the Pace Gallery and the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 1985), 11.

⁴ Emerson, "Nature," 38. (my emphasis)

The implication of these Platonic ideas is hugely important to Emerson, as it puts the physical world, that which is most tangible and stable for us, on unsteady ground. All material forms are conceived initially as *ideas* and their resulting physicality is utterly dependent on the “affections” of the spirit realm. It is crucial that Emerson uses the word “terminus” to describe these material facts—they represent a particular end or a *finite* entity in the world, one accessed by the human “understanding.” Meanwhile, the spirit world, or “universal soul,” which remains in an eternal state of flux by obeying the “succession” of nature, can only be approached by the highest imaginative function: human “Reason.”⁵

So for Emerson we must think of Reason as the operative force of the ideal, and likewise the Understanding as belonging to the materialist. Patrick Keane writes of this age-old philosophical divide between understanding and reason: “The Transcendentalists scurried about applying this distinction, seizing on a rock against which empiricism and doubt (i.e. understanding) could not prevail: the conception of a divine Reason that was transcendent yet *interior*, here, now, and within the individual.”⁶ It is precisely this conceptual distinction that Robert Irwin argues for in his own writings; only the dichotomy exists between what he calls “reason” and “logic:”

Reason/individual/intuition/feeling: Reason is the processing of our interface with our own subjective being

Logic/community/intellect/mental: Logic is the processing of our interface with our objective constructs, our social being⁷

In this case, logic is the socially favored half of the binary because, as Irwin explains, it provides “concrete, repeatable, and predictable” facts. However, Irwin warns that the logical only seems more successful because it “cuts the scale down,” operates only within the “confines” of its own paradigm.⁸ Thus logic, like Emersonian “understanding” and materialism, is an abstract system that can deal only with what is *finite*. The concerns for Irwin are the aspects of the “world of experience” that are not captured by these “logical subsystems.” Irwin’s resolution accords with Emerson’s when he explains:

The artist, however, as a *reasoning* being, deals with the overall complexity of which all the logical subsystems are merely segments, and he deals with them through the intuitive side of his human potential—⁹

Here, inconsistencies that would have been outside a logic-based lens become just the kinds of things that interest Irwin as an artist. In a formal essay written by the artist, Irwin refined his distinction between reason and logic in even more Emersonian terms: “our logics,” Irwin asserts, “hold components

⁵ *Ibid.*, 35.

⁶ Patrick J. Keane, *Emerson, Romanticism, and Intuitive Reason: The Transatlantic “Light of All Our Day”* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2005), 53.

⁷ Lawrence Weschler, *Seeing Is Forgetting the Name of the Thing One Sees: Over Thirty Years of Conversations With Robert Irwin* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), 139.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*, 140.

to act as a kind of truth, *locking them in* as a matter of style into a form of *permanence*. Conversely, the process of reasoning is free of such abstraction and can account for that most basic condition of the universe—*change*.¹⁰

The two thinkers appear to agree on philosophical terms, but the more pressing question remains: what does it mean to *practice* reason-based thought? It is very much the question Emerson is pursuing in the “vocational quest” of his second series of essays. Yet, we are rightfully skeptical of finding an answer in Irwin—art production seems a particularly materialistic approach to such an inquiry. However, Irwin’s implementation of his intellectual theory yields a decidedly anti-materialistic result, or what is known in the art world as “nonobjective” art. Irwin works tirelessly to deconstruct the art-object and shift the focus to the *phenomena* of art, as he says ultimately: “The *experience* is the “thing,” experiencing is the “object.”¹¹

Over the course of his career, Irwin slowly refined this phenomenological reduction of art, each stage of which proved to be a more controversial result than the last. But following the *progression* of these “inquiries” as Irwin calls them, discovering *how* the artist got to this somewhat improbable definition of “art as experience,” provides us with a profound demonstration of human reason at work, and warrants a thorough exploration.¹²

Irwin’s first self-conscious inquiry into the art of perception occurred in the mid-sixties with the “dot paintings.” This work came as a response to the artist’s discomfort with abstract expressionism, a genre to which almost all of his earliest painting belongs. These pre-dot canvases, while they are comprised of gestural markings far removed from any *representational* cogency, are highly *figural* in the sense that we recognize the imagistic *forms* of the lines that comprise them. In Weschler’s words, “they read as lines” first and foremost, and render any opportunity for “unmediated presence” impossible. The dot paintings, by contrast, are “positive assertions of space,” “fields of energy” generated without any linear marks.¹³ By painting sequences of small dots of two alternating opposite colors across a white background, Irwin was able to achieve a visual canceling effect—we do not see either of the two colors (or dots), but rather the energy generated by the interaction of the two. But what is most important about these canvasses is the “complex succession of impressions” that the paintings can evoke; as art critic Philip Leider notes:

Some time must pass—a minute, or two, or three—before the viewer becomes fully aware of a mass which seems to have emerged out of the white plane ... The coloration is so subdued that there is no possibility of defining what one sees, but rather what it *suggests* ... it is the hypnotic *involvement* between the viewer and the elements of color and whiteness before him.¹⁴

¹⁰ Irwin, *Being and Circumstance*, 29.

¹¹ Weschler, *Seeing Is Forgetting the Name of the Thing One Sees*, 131.

¹² What follows is an irresponsibly reductive explanation of Robert Irwin’s work between 1964-1980. It is difficult enough to describe a single piece of the artist’s work, let alone construct a meaningful chronology. Just trying to represent a piece, after the fact, runs the risk of allowing text, or an idea, or a photograph, to replace the primacy of visual perception, which, as will become clear, is the very issue at stake in Irwin’s work. I have decided not to include photo reproductions of Irwin’s work here because, as Irwin says: “photographs capture everything that the work is not, and nothing of what it is.”

¹³ *Ibid.*, 91.

¹⁴ Philip Leider, introduction to *Robert Irwin Exhibition Catalogue: Los Angeles County Museum of Art* (Los Angeles, 1966).

These paintings demand to be digested *experientially*. They, quite literally, “slow the viewer down” in preparation for a perceptual effect or encounter.

In this way, the dot paintings momentarily satisfied Irwin’s problem of distracting figural forms while simultaneously laying emphasis on the act of visual experience. But no sooner had he solved this problem than a new concern arose in its place: the status of the work’s edge. For despite Irwin’s elimination of the figural language of these pieces, the shadow formed by the canvas’ edge gave the dot paintings an undeniable *physicality*, an object-ness that was intrusive to the pure experience of their viewing. This realization pushed Irwin to further dematerialize the art-object, and in turn, to his next artistic inquiry: the disc series. Irwin’s discs, mostly completed between 1966-1967, are three-dimensional paintings made of shaped aluminum and acrylic lacquer and artificially illuminated from behind. Critic Klaus Kertess does an excellent job of conveying the effect of standing before one of these discs:

[the disc paintings] achieve a lyric interplay between painting and ambient space, shadow and materiality, real light and painted light. The shadows thrown by the painted disc [are] as carefully planned and visually critical and imposing as the surface actually painted. Virtual objecthood [becomes] virtual illusion.¹⁵

Irwin’s discs, once liberated of their physical substance, hover ephemerally over the surface of the wall, challenging not only our conception of *what* it is we see, but *how* we see it.

The next phase for Irwin follows conceptually from where the discs leave off—having dematerialized our perception of the art-object, what need was there for an object at all? Irwin’s room installations completed between 1970-1977 dramatically, and controversially, engage the core of this question. For these installations Irwin would empty a gallery of all its contents and artificial lighting (most famously the entire fourth floor of the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York) and *redefine* the space on his own terms. Irwin’s translucent scrim and window tinting sculpted the natural lighting into an almost tangible presence in the objectless space. This space is objectless, but not empty, for that is decidedly not the point. “The rooms,” Irwin explains “are not empty on any kind of perceptual level,” but rather filled with “shapes, edges, corners, shadows, surfaces, textural changes...” The goal, Irwin continues, is to draw the viewer’s attention “to all those things that have been going on all along but which previously have been too incidental or too meaningless to really seriously enter our visual structure, our picture of the world.”¹⁶ The rooms were in a constant state of *flux*, always shifting and forcing the viewer to perpetually re-triangulate his position in the space. Ultimately, the objective of Irwin’s room installations was to involve the observer as much as possible: to make him keenly sensitive to the *dynamic* of his own perceptual awareness.

In 1977, Irwin finally worked his way down to “point zero.” The “terminus” of the artist’s phenomenological reduction (which is precisely not an end but the *beginning* for Irwin) necessitated the move outside into the world. Irwin abandoned the restrictions of the museum gallery and walked out into the street, or sometimes, into the Californian desert. Irwin, age 54, confronted Nature and for the first

¹⁵ Klaus Kertess, “The Architecture of Perception” in *Robert Irwin* ed. Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles (Los Angeles, California: 1993), 115.

¹⁶ Weschler, *Seeing Is Forgetting the Name of the Thing One Sees*, 187.

time, saw beauty unadulterated. Just as he had dematerialized the art-object, Irwin was now ready to evaporate the artist's role as "artist" altogether. Sitting in a museum coffee shop, peering out across the street at a glass façade bathed in sunlight, Irwin remarked to his biographer Lawrence Weschler: "That the light strikes a certain wall at a particular time of day in a particular way and it's beautiful, *that*, as far as I'm concerned, now fits all my criteria for art."¹⁷ This defiant rejection of the necessity of an artist's influence demonstrates the most profound assertion of Irwin's core belief: aesthetic perception itself is the pure subject of art.

In Emerson, we would not be surprised to find, Irwin has a fellow traveler. Emerson says, in terms that anticipate Irwin's provocative spirit, "our love of the real draws us to permanence, but health of body consists in circulation."¹⁸ Only so far as we are unsettled is there any hope for us. In applying this idea to Art, Emerson writes:

[pictures] will bear an emphasis of attention once, which it cannot retain, though we fain would continue to be pleased in that manner. How strongly I have felt of pictures; that when you have seen one well, you must take your leave of it; you shall never see it again.¹⁹

What this amounts to is the value/perspective shift developed over the course of Irwin's artistic career. For as has often been said of Irwin: his art "explores the division between the art-object and the art, between painting and the *experience* of art. What stays in the museum is only the art-object, not valueless, but not the value of art. *Art is what has happened to the viewer.*"²⁰ Emerson's intriguing line from "The Poet," "Art is the path of the creator to his work," might be rephrased: Art is the path (method/process/experience) of the observer to the work (art-object).

Our inquiry comes full circle. Who is Emerson's poet? A sayer, a lover of beauty, a "liberating god," the poet uses the highest sort of "seeing" to "share the path or circuit of things through forms, and so [makes] them translucent to others."²¹ The poet "unlocks and emancipates the minds and lives of those they reach. Their "language (i.e. their *art*) is vehicular and transitive; their symbols are fluxional."²² These are the very ideals and means to which Irwin's philosophical project, indeed his *life's* project, is dedicated. For in the final culmination of his totally unthinkable redefinition of "Art as Experience," as it is conceived of in its purest sense, Irwin's end brings us to the beginning of endless opportunity. The perspective shift that Irwin "shares" with us means nothing less than ultimate liberation—having "unlocked" the Reason of perception, "the poet" declares:

Now we are presented and challenged with the infinite, everyday richness of "phenomenal" perception—with none of the customary abstract limitations as to form, place, or materials—one which seeks to discover and value the potential for experiencing beauty in everything.²³

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 190.

¹⁸ Emerson, "Experience," 202.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Leider LACMA un-paginated exhibition catalogue

²¹ Emerson, "The Poet," 191.

²² Francis, "The Poet and Experience," 101.

²³ Irwin, *Being and Circumstance*, 29.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Emerson, Ralph W. Various essays. In *Emerson's Prose and Poetry*, ed. Joel Porte and Sandra Morris. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2001.
- Francis, Richard L. "The Poet and Experience." In *Emerson Centenary Essays*, ed. Joel Myerson, 93-106. Carobondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1982.
- Keane, Patrick J. *Emerson, Romanticism, and Intuitive Reason: The Transatlantic "Light of All Our Day."* Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2005.
- Kertess, Klaus. "The Architecture of Perception." In Robert Irwin ed. Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art, 113-28. Los Angeles: 1993.
- Leider, Philp. "Introduction to Robert Irwin." In *Exhibition Catalogue: Los Angeles County Museum of Art*. Los Angeles: 1966.
- Robert, Irwin. *Being and Circumstance: Notes Toward a Conditional Art*. Larkspur Landing, California: Lapis Press in conjunction with the Pace Gallery and the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 1985.
- Weschler, Lawrence. *Seeing Is Forgetting the Name of the Thing One Sees: Over Thirty Years of Conversations With Robert Irwin*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009.