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# What is observation? James Turrell's skyspace installation at PS1

By Denis G. Pelli



James Turrell's skyspace installation at PS1

"You don't get to tell people how they should see something. It is only something you demonstrate. ...If you look at some portions of New York sky you can have an amazingly beautiful part of the sky. [But] you don't notice that when you can see all the rest ... This is one of the things that happens in my work. I isolate something, often something that is actually occurring outside, whether a sunset or another light event, so you feel it heightened, even though it is less." (1)

I am a scientist. Each Fall and Spring, I take the dozen students in my Laboratory in Perception class to see Turrell's skyspace installation at PS1 in New York. It's our only field trip. We go to see Turrell's piece because it's the best way I know to teach observation.

An empty room with a large sharp-edged hole in the ceiling. The perimeter of the room is lined with benches for sitting, and it has some interior lighting. That's it. We arrive half an hour before sunset and stay for an

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hour, leaving only once it's dark. I ask the students to bring a jacket, a wristwatch, and a notebook. And I ask them to write down anything they find remarkable in their notebooks, recording the time along with each observation. Sometimes, I announce the moment of equiluminance, when the brightness of the sky matches that of the ceiling. Afterwards, we go to a local restaurant and compare notes.

"If we define art as part of the realm of experience, we can assume that after a viewer looks at a piece he leaves with the art, because the 'art' has been experienced." (2)

The goal of this class is for the students to learn science actively. It is no good doing canned experiments, demonstrating what we already know. We must explore a topic that is not well understood, to formulate and answer new questions.

As I teach my students, the first step in any scientific exploration is to observe. This is seemingly the most passive step, yet I suspect it is the most creative. There's more to science than just observing, yet I think that it is the quality of the observation that most distinguishes the important discoveries. Nearly all scientific papers include data, and the data are generally measurements of the world, i.e. observations. However, there is a broader sense of "observation" that goes beyond recording to evaluating. Curiosity drives one to pay attention to one's world, and as one tries to make sense of it, causes one to linger on some particular feature that suddenly seems to stick out as odd, or beautiful, or strangely hard to explain.

Before one has a specific question, one typically has a vague sense of an area of interest. The students are accustomed to copying important facts from blackboards into their notebooks. But most have no experience of wading through the masses of facts in any real situation to select those that deserve further attention. Many people have had the experience of taking a walk in the woods with a naturalist. As you learn the names and stories of the trees, you see more. An undifferentiated mass of trees – the forest – becomes a collection of individual maples, birches, and

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pires. However, this dramatic enhancement of one's power of observation isn't sufficiently different from a classroom to fully expose the nature of observation. There's too much explanation. It may seem that we are just learning facts from the naturalist's narrative.

Turrell's skyspace allows each viewer to experience the full glory of pure observation. You're there for an hour, and it's quiet and comfortable. You don't need to know anything in advance. Walking into the room and sitting down, you've already seen all his cards: an illuminated room with a large sharp-edged aperture to the sky. There's no trick. You just experience the piece, in the slowness of time. Your mind wanders. You notice something. The once-distant sky now seems near, in the same plane as the ceiling. The hole has become a glowing blue panel.

I'm always surprised by the diversity of the students' observations, their dynamic perceptual interpretations of the room and sky—changes in color, reflectance, emission, sharpness, shape, distance, occlusion, motion, and, recently, sound. One hears the neighborhood cars, the hot dog vendor, and the passersby.

Turrell's piece requires no explanation. It is ordinary enough that viewers feel competent to observe and try to understand. And yet it's provocative enough to produce many dramatic visual effects that greatly surprise most viewers. But the room is just a room. The viewer does all the work, observing it all and noting what's remarkable. Turrell stays out of it. There is no lecture.

"The more you have extraordinary experience in flight, the more you recognize the difficulty in passing on the experience to others. Your experience becomes such that it is almost too difficult to talk about it. It seems useless to try to transmit the experience. It would be easier to send others on the flight itself. The idea of the Boddhisattva, one who comes back and entices other to the journey, is to some degree the task of the artist. It is a different role from that of one who is there when you get there. The Boddhisattva entices you to enter that passage, to take the journey. This is where

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 Robert Blaskett  
 Rich Bloechl

I began to appreciate an art that could be a non-vicarious act, a seeing whose subject was your seeing." (3)

1. James Turrell interviewed by Ana Maria Torres, April 18, 2004.
2. James Turrell, 21 January 1969, in A Report of the Art and Technology Program of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art 1967-1971. Los Angeles: LACMA.
3. James Turrell, 1993, Air mass. London: South Bank Centre. p. 18.

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