



Digital renderings of James Turrell's *Aten Reign*, 2013, a site-specific installation for the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York. Renderings: Andreas Tjøelhaug.

1000 WORDS

James Turrell

TALKS ABOUT *ATEN REIGN*, 2013 • INTRODUCTION BY MIWON KWON

LIGHT MAKES VISION POSSIBLE yet paradoxically remains beyond our vision most of the time. Changing this "beyond" condition of light into a proximate and bodily experience has been James Turrell's artistic objective for almost fifty years. From relatively small gallery-based light projections that create the appearance of floating planes or cubes (*Afrum-Proto*, 1966; *Decker*, 1967) to one-person booths or apparatuses that invite individuals to experience concentrated doses of sensory stimulation (the Perceptual Cells, including *Alien Exam*, 1989; *Close Call*, 1992; *Gasworks*, 1993; and *Bindu Shards*, 2010) to installations made of strategic cuts in walls or ceilings to frame natural light or direct artificial lights (*Virga*, 1974; *City of Arhirit*, 1976; *Hover*, 1983; and all Skyspaces) to large-scale walk-in environments of either deep darkness or mysteriously gaseous luminosity (the Wedgework and Ganzfeld constructions) to the ongoing transformation of an extinct volcano in the Painted Desert region of Arizona into a unique multichamber, multitunnel observatory (*Roden Crater*, 1974–), Turrell's singular goal has been the presentation of light as a palpable and encompassing physical reality.

Most commonly identified with Southern California's Light and Space movement of the late 1960s and '70s, which focused on the phenomenon of visual perception and perceptual psychology as primary areas of artistic investigation, Turrell is art-historically positioned as part of the generation that sought the

dematerialization of the art object. Underrecognized is the extent to which his long-term investigation of light, perhaps the most immaterial of artistic media, has involved the development of an exceptional architectural practice, arguably the most material of practices in the cultural field. For the quest to achieve the "thing-ness of light," as the artist once put it, has entailed the design and construction of customized windows, skylights, walls, ceilings, rooms, passageways, tunnels, chambers, walk-in structures, and whole buildings, and, of course, the transformation of an entire volcanic crater into a multipurpose program of spatial experiences.

Turrell's art as a complex coordination of architecture and light (or light as architecture) will be showcased this summer in three museum exhibitions across the United States—the Los Angeles County Museum of Art; the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston; and the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York. Perhaps the most anticipated work in any of these shows is *Aten Reign*, 2013, the new Skylight installation designed specifically for the central rotunda of Frank Lloyd Wright's iconic Guggenheim building. The artist has said that he wants his audience to discover light as "not so much something that reveals as . . . itself the revelation." Yet one can predict that Wright's architecture will be revealed anew through Turrell's counterarchitecture of light—and maybe vice versa.

—Miwon Kwon

JAMES TURRELL

THE WORK FOR THE GUGGENHEIM ROTUNDA, *Aten Reign*, is going to be a Skylight piece, similar to *Night Rain*, which was done for the Millennium Dome in London in 2000. If I could have taken the roof off of the Guggenheim, I would have done a Skyspace piece.

Basically, the project entails constructing a funnel-shaped tower inside Frank Lloyd Wright's architecture. The tower is composed of a set of rings of light. When viewers enter the museum, they will simultaneously enter the piece. Once inside, viewers will be enveloped in a foggy or misty atmosphere of whatever color the lights offer at that moment, an absorbing environment of slow but encompassing visual experience. Then the viewers' eyes will probably be drawn to the ceiling, and they will be able to see how the light is mixed as it comes down in a cascade through four different levels. Light will assume a very physical quality on its way down to the floor, and the viewers will recognize that the light they are

bathed in is the combined result of the lights they are looking at. And the color of the lights will shift very slowly, almost imperceptibly. It will be like looking at the minute hand or watching paint dry. Actually, it's more like watching the change of light at sunset. You notice the change more if you look away and then come back to it rather than watch continuously.

The shape of the space and the four levels is elliptical, but at the entry area inside the tower, these will appear to be circular, recalling the view from inside the tunnel at the Roden Crater, where the opening to the sky first appears to be a circle but "becomes" an ellipse as one moves closer to the opening.

I often deal with ellipses. We all think that nature likes circles, but nature really likes ellipses. A circle is an ellipse with the two foci at the same point. The oval is a combining of two ellipses; sometimes one of them is a circle. This is a beautiful shape, too, like an egg. I enjoy these forms very much. They're very earth-typical forms. They are also the basis of a very beautiful space that Wright made at the Guggenheim, so I want to enliven it with light.

With *Aten Reign*, the experience inside the tower will not, in fact, be an illusion, but simply the reality of another kind of light.

Below: James Turrell, *Roden Crater*, 1974-, Coconino, AZ.

Opposite page, bottom left: James Turrell, *Roden Crater*, 1974-, Coconino, AZ. Interior view, East Portal. Photo: Florian Holzherr.



Most people make a distinction between natural and artificial light, but there is really only natural light since all light is the product of something being burned; its specific characteristics are determined by the chemical composition of what is being burned and by the temperature at which it is being burned. Different woods will give different color light. Burning tungsten will give a particular color light. Or put halogens around the tungsten to augment it and the light will get whiter. So instead of natural versus artificial light, I work with our light versus the light outside, and right now our light is modest compared with the light of the sun.

There are some Skyspace pieces, like *Twilight Epiphany*, 2012, at Rice University in Houston, which involve changing light outside and changing light inside. By manipulating the light inside, one can make the sky turn any color one likes. I am interested in how this plays with our perception and our appreciation of the depth of the sky. At times, it can appear opaque, as if it were paint on the ceiling. Sometimes this "paint" can appear to be descending



into our space, as if there were a velocity to the experience of the light. I am trying to change the sense of the speed of the light, or to make it transparent so that you are drawn into it.

At the Guggenheim, viewers will be able to go around the tower of light in the rotunda from the outside as they walk Wright's ramp. They will be able to see the rings of changing light from different perspectives and figure out how the experience inside the tower is created. In a way, this is tantamount to seeing the man behind the curtain, exposing the setup of an illusion, which is easily destroyed if you can see through it. But then the viewer will recognize that there is actually a different kind of light on the inside than on the outside. The experience inside the tower is not, in fact, an illusion, but simply the reality of another kind of light.

It's very much like what happens when you're onstage with a lot of footlights and stage lights on top of you. You look out into the audience, but you can't see them because there is so much light on you. They see you, but you can't see them. (The same thing happens when the sun lights the atmosphere: We can't see through it to perceive the stars that are actually there during the day.) When you step in front of the footlights, you can, of course, see the audience. This is precisely what light does—create and delimit spaces. Light makes architecture.

The sense of being inside or outside will be complex with the Guggenheim piece. For instance, in the rotunda space viewers will know they are inside, but experientially it may feel exterior; one may feel a suspension of limits. This is a feeling we know from music, perhaps. You can be in a small car or tiny apartment but you can turn on music that makes the space feel much bigger. And it's not about imagining a bigger space. It is really a sensory experience of no longer feeling the enclosure of the apartment or the car.

I have always been interested in the limits of the inside/outside dyad and in breaking through them. When I look at a space, I want to find a way to connect to the space outside, space beyond, either visually or by taking the roof off or by creating that sense of expansion that can be achieved with music, so that we are reminded that we exist in a much bigger space than the small enclosures we make for protection and occupy temporarily.

We're like crustaceans. We make shells that enclose us. I have always wanted to find ways to meaningfully open these shells. I use enclosures to make our light more significant or to make small amounts of it more powerful. I make spaces that protect and contain light to apprehend it for our perception. □

Aten Reign, 2013, will be on view as part of the exhibition "James Turrell" at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, June 21–Sept. 25.



Above: James Turrell, *Twilight Epiphany*, 2012, Suzanne Deal Booth Centennial Pavilion, Rice University, Houston.

Below: James Turrell, *Bridget's Bardo*, 2009, neon and fluorescent light. Installation view, Kunstmuseum Wolfsburg, Germany. Photo: Florian Holzherr.



James Turrell, *Night Rain*, 1999, scrim, natural and neon light. Installation view, Millennium Experience exposition, Millennium Dome, London, 2000.

