

Outside like a Light

by Kathryn Allan

***The Other Horizon, 1998* (Austrian Museum of Applied Arts/Contemporary Art, Vienna)** [Exhibition - MAK Museum Vienna](#)

It might seem an unlikely passenger list, airborne over Wakefield on a warm June day in 2023: an intense Vermeer, getting closer to the sun than his 17th century illuminated Oude Langendijk corner allows him, wondering at his next feminist work (*Woman in a Skyspace?*); Constable – death six years away – scanning for spectrums, sketchbook out, literally ‘skying’; his Romantic rival Turner enjoying the light – the painter *of* it, after all – yet sighing heavily aside him, eager to reach Venice (*‘Are we there yet? I need to be there by 1833’*); and pilgrim Ye (formally ‘Kanye’) zenned out in the back, scouting for his next film location whilst his millions – being eyed by Vermeer for a purchase of lapis lazuli – weigh down the plane. Monet, an artist who paints the same scene many times in order to capture changing light and not one to pass up an en plein air opportunity, misses the flight: he’s having his cataracts removed.

The pilot? James Turrell, he of the Light and Space movement (plus aviator), his time-travelling aerial joyride, aka his studio, taking in Yorkshire Sculpture Park’s *Deer Shelter Skyspace* – an underground chiaroscuro chamber camouflaged in a grass-topped bunker once used to house the park’s deers, today giving refuge to this author who, looking upwards, sees a small plane overhead. The whirr of the plane’s engine makes itself audible over baaing sheep and some unseasonal psithurism – this is a work very much outside as well as an experience of interiority. Turrell’s West Yorkshire work is one of approximately 80 skyspaces around the world, another of which is *The Other Horizon* at the Austrian Museum of Applied Arts – a work we are invited to consider in *Learning to Look at Modern Art*. What, asks a centuries-separated disparate cargo, makes *The Other Horizon* modernist?

Spectator as participant – Turrell as medium

Us. Inside Turrell's chamber – a space that has eluded me until now – I am no longer simply looking. I am, instead, *within* an artwork, my body an active participant: my neck craned skyward as clouds scud past creating a sort of animated cathedral ceiling (no illusionism here – never have I had a deeper, more transcendental sense of the present being all that we have); my limbs illuminated by the sunlight blazing through the aperture above me; my mind calmed by the room's embrace, Rothko-like rectangles kindling the walls, dissolving, returning seconds later ablaze. Similarly, it is us who completes Turrell's *Other Horizon*, and in this participatory sense it is a modern work of art with Turrell as medium. Duchamp said it years before, believing that 'the viewer completes the work of art and the whole thing only exists properly when this interaction is taking place.' (Acton, 2004, p.64)

A lineage of light – Turrell as a Romantic

'James Turrell says that he is interested in turning a painter's vision of light into three dimensions' (ibid, p.226). Here we have an artistic lineage of light- and sky-worship, from pigmented divine light and the 17th century 'explosion of scientific interest in light' (Greenberg, 2022, p.8) to Turner's conveyance of the perception of light and Constable's iterative 'skying', from the Impressionists' display of the dynamism of light and the neo-Impressionist Seurat who illuminated the world with his 'atoms of matter' (ibid, p.212) to the California Light and Space Movement and Flavin's fluorescence. Turrell, who Acton describes as 'coming close to the Romantic vision' (ibid, p.227) takes his place on this line, lit-up near the end of the 20th century and into the 21st, yet, in Romantic reverse fashion, taking us *back* to nature. There we are again – *us* as participant. On this meditative co-creation, Andrew Graham-Dixon writes, 'The part of nature on which Turrell invites his audience to meditate is not trees, brooks and stones but the sky.' (Graham-Dixon, 2006, p.8). Whilst earlier seeing was perhaps more about the artist's vision than the spectator's – can a canvas-bound, static image, however intentionally experiential, be more than someone else's view? – Turrell modernises the discussion: 'My work is more about

your seeing than it is about my seeing, although it is the product of my seeing.’ (Turrell, 1996, cited in Graham Dixon, 2006, p.8)

Light and space as (subject) matter

His is an entirely dematerialised form of art, based not on the exhibition of things that he has made, but the shaping of visual experiences that he has conceived. (Graham Dixon, 2006, p.9)

We see this dematerialisation in *The Other Horizon*. No materials are given in the image description in Acton’s text (Acton, 2004, Colour Plate 24); instead we are shown a photograph of the work. On the face of it, there isn’t much to a Turrell skyspace: a modern-looking room with a rectilinear hole cut into the ceiling, removing the spectator’s view of the horizon, the space of the sky brought down to the human sphere – Turrell’s *being* light rather than *being about* light. The ‘subject’ removed from ‘subject matter’, leaving us with matter – light and space. If only Tatlin had known it could be so simple – let nature do the moving.

Turrell began experimenting with light as a pure medium in the mid-1960s. The greatest expression of this is arguably Turrell’s series of over eighty Skyspaces, conceived as an aperture installed in the gallery ceiling which allows viewers to witness the sky decontextualised of the horizon line; a pure expression of light and colour. (Greenberg, 2022, p.186)

Modern materials, postmodern sensibilities

There is, of course, more to it than that. Turrell makes use of modernity’s materials – heated seating, ambient lighting hidden behind, highly engineered, architectonic spaces that are years in the planning. Writing in the Guardian, Rory Carroll remarks upon the ‘Nasa-level meticulousness’ with which Turrell artworks are installed in galleries and museums. (Carroll, 2015). This meticulousness borrows from Minimalism: Turrell’s own hand is not evident in the

making. He is architect and designer who, like a Minimalist, ‘measures everything up and then has someone else execute it.’ (Acton, 2004, p.151)

There are certainly no easels in sight, Turrell’s skyspaces dissolving the boundaries between painting, sculpture and design in a postmodern way (this is the 1960s +38 years, after all). *The Other Horizon* is part-installation, part-impermanent artwork, re-creating itself anew with the changing weather, atmosphere and spectator – infinite compositional possibilities, a postmodern collage being deconstructed and reconstructed continually. In that sense, it is dynamic. To the envy of Vorticists and Futurists everywhere, it is literally moving.

Turrell’s artistic ancestry is not one of painters only: his works borrow from photography and film, the modern image-makers. His skyspaces act as room-sized cameras, the ceiling holes the apertures, our eyes smaller apertures within. Turrell tells us, ‘When light is reduced the pupil opens and we can really feel it.’ (Turrell, 2018, cited in Delaney, 2018)

Colour – a modern, moving spectrum

In *The Other Horizon*, the moment captured in Acton, we have the complementaries – the blue we assign to the sky, a reddened floor and seats, orange walls burnished with a yellow outline. But this is not all we have. Just as Renoir approximately one hundred years before used ‘a higher colour key’ (Acton, 2004, p.213) to effect stronger and brighter colours, so to does Turrell control colour and composition to change the spectator’s sense of the sky’s local colour. Visit a skyspace at another time of day to that captured in Acton’s image and our aerial ceiling will be transformed into a different hue.

A conceptual work – Turrell as Land artist

Whilst he does not qualify as a Land artist in a total sense – he isn’t Smithson or Long, Turrell’s work being more ‘a portrait of the artist touching the sky’ than Long’s ‘earth’ (Long, 1971, cited in Tufnell, 2007, p.9) – Turrell is partly of the Land art movement. His skyspaces are of the land,

sited across the globe – Yorkshire Sculpture Park, Kielder Water in Northumberland and Tremenheere Sculpture Gardens in Cornwall are UK locations – and the 1974 arrival of his first skyspace overlapped with the wider Conceptual art movement of the decade. And whilst we don't have the rocks and twigs typical of Land art, we have light – nature's material at its most bright.

Of the present

In Wakefield, it's exactly midday on Sunday 25th June as I enter Turrell's Deer Shelter Skyspace. In Vienna, it's 1pm as someone enters *The Other Horizon*. Horizonless, each of us. Turrell's work is of the present, here and elsewhere, and how more modern (or postmodern) than that can a work of art be?

The plane comes into land. Turner disembarks for Venice, Constable travels onward to Suffolk. Ye is California-bound, whilst forty-two-year-old Vermeer must get home to Delft. And what of Turrell? Onwards and upwards, via the Hudson River. As he climbs back into his studio, a man bearing a striking resemblance approaches. In a moment of recognition they look at one another – both bearded, both octogenarians, although one seeming somehow much older than the other – then the stranger speaks: *'Désolé, j'ai du mal à lire les horaires. Est-ce que ce vol va à Giverny?'*

The author – *Woman in a Skyspace* – meanwhile, holds still, prismatic rectangles dancing on her eyelids, tripping the light fantastic.



Deer Shelter Skyspace¹

¹ Image the author's own, June 2023

With thanks to [Deborah Grice](#) – herself both pilot and painter of the skies – for her enthusiastic advice on plane types for fantastical aerial joyrides. ‘Debbie, how many artists could you fit into a small plane?’

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