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**JAMES TURRELL & CINEMA**

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# JAMES TURRELL, DREAMS BEYOND CINEMA

ARA OSTERWEIL

Desolating any luminous conditions except those of functionality, *24/7* is part of an immense incapacitation of visual experience.

-Jonathan Crary, *24/7: Late Capitalism and The Ends of Sleep*

Shot en plein air with a stationary camera, the earliest films of the aptly named Lumière brothers enthralled their audiences with an illuminated chunk of the world transformed through framing, magnification and reproduction. Of course, centuries before this well-worn myth of modernity, Plato's allegory of the cave—in which bound prisoners misinterpret shadows on the wall for reality—also pivots on an effect of light. Suggesting the illusory nature of representation, as well as the impossibility of a direct encounter with truth, Plato used the crowd's hostility towards enlightenment as a justification for autocratic rule. Centuries later, film theorists employed the same allegory to explain the dynamics of film spectatorship, comparing the audience's supposed inability to distinguish the real from representation to a form of imprisonment. Yet classical film theory's presumptions of duped, immobile spectators simply do not account for all of the moving, shaking, thinking, and talking that has happened in and around the cinema for over a hundred years. It certainly does not explain the "adventures of perception"<sup>1</sup> that have characterized experimental film or the light art with which I argue it is kindred.

So what, then, was cinema? And what might it be still? In an era in which cinema's ontology has been radically redefined by new forms of making and viewing moving images, cinephiles are prone to fret over the

extinction of our beloved medium. Yet rather than ring cinema's death toll, I prefer to imagine alternative potentials for its future. This essay meditates on what cinema in the expanded field might learn from the work of artist James Turrell. Dispensing with the temporal unit of the reel, as well as many other aspects of the cinematic apparatus, Turrell's perception chambers are nonetheless deeply cinematic in their captivation of perceivers through the framing of light and motion. This essay thinks Turrell's work through cinema as a way of investigating how the vitalizing forms of collectivity, shared temporality, and perceptual mutuality that the cinema provided for audiences over the last century might be extended and expanded in our present moment. It does so, in part, as a way of questioning whether particular concerns about, and obsessions with, medium specificity (by filmmakers, critics and academics) impede our understanding about what was, and what still might be, the redemptive potential of cinema.

In an era in which the exhibition of experimental film and video has largely shifted from the alternative theater to the museum installation, filmmakers have developed alternative strategies of engaging the "site specificity" of spectatorship.<sup>2</sup> Yet as Erika Balsom explains, the time-based medium of cinema struggles to relocate itself in an environment developed for the perception of still objects and artifacts. For museumgoers accustomed to perambulating through exhibitions in staccato patterns of motion and perception — walk, stop, look, move on — film and video projects demand "durational commitment[s]" not easily satisfied within the gallery environment.<sup>3</sup> While filmmakers have developed ever more ambitious (and often problematic) ways of

negotiating the temporal and locative particularities of the museum, many films lose their resonance when situated in the distracted environment of the white cube.

As Hal Foster, Rosalind Krauss, Balsom and others have noted, one troublesome response to the exhibition of cinema within what Krauss describes as the “late capitalist museum”<sup>4</sup> is the creation of high-budget “technophilic extravaganzas”<sup>5</sup> that use hypersaturation and “immersive spectacle” in ways that mirror the “spurious production”<sup>6</sup> of experience by the commodity and entertainment industries of late capitalism. As I shall argue, Turrell’s work operates in meaningful opposition to this trend. Turrell’s non-film based, durational light art suggests alternative possibilities for temporal, kinesthetic, and perceptual engagement with illuminated phenomenon. Extending cinema beyond its typical reliance on fixed duration and materiality, Turrell orchestrates forms of participation that refuse the incessant activity and hypersaturation of late capitalism and its art forms.

#### EXPANDED CINEMA, OR CINEMA WITHOUT ORGANS

Let me clarify: James Turrell is not, and has never been, a filmmaker. Nonetheless, in his profound investigation into the embodied conditions of perception, movement, architecture, and spectatorship, I argue that Turrell’s oeuvre is kindred with, and parallel to, the project of experimental cinema. As in cinema, light is at the very core of Turrell’s project, and yet as he insists, his medium is perception itself. Whereas narrative cinema harnesses light to render the diegetic world transparent, Turrell focuses on the viewer’s phenomenological engagement with the beam of light that traditionally but not necessarily emanates from the projector. Turrell came to recognize how the light itself was more important aspect than the picture.

Turrell’s mobilization of light and projection beyond the limitations of the traditional cinematic apparatus places his work in dialogue with experimental film. Beginning in the nineteen sixties, the search for modes of expanded perception inaugurated innovations in multimedia projection that revolutionized how illuminated images were created and experienced. These expanded cinemas involved not only a re-conception of the typical ways of harnessing light but a concomitant quest for expansive forms of perception and rationality. While there are countless examples of expanded cinema from this period, one of my favorites is an unrealized impulse by filmmaker Barbara Rubin. In the mid-1960s, Rubin (Christmas on Earth, 1963) travelled around Europe canceling screenings of experimental films that her compatriot P. Adams Sitney had struggled to organize. Rather than enshrining avant-garde cinema in the hallowed halls of galleries and

universities, Rubin wanted to project these images on the sky itself. Her goal was not only to revolutionize the way these films were received, but to bring people together in enchanted forms of communion that broached the perceptual boundaries between the inside of the theater and the outside of the world. Shooting film without any cartridges in her camera, Rubin was one of the first experimental filmmakers to question whether even the most central material elements of the cinematic dispositif were necessary to the utopian project of cinema. Like Barbara Rubin, James Turrell mines what Frances Richard has described as the “tension between aperture and frame” to move towards experiences of perceptual boundlessness.<sup>7</sup> Working beyond the boundaries of the cinematographic apparatus and yet within the cinematic investigation of the “phenomenology of spectatorship,”<sup>8</sup> Turrell reinvents the relationship between the body, the built environment, and the natural world.

I recognize that my use of the term ‘cinematic’ to describe Turrell’s non-film based practice may be seen as an ahistorical, idealist conception of an endlessly flexible media that critics might well rally against. It is not intended as such. For over forty years, James Turrell has

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**1** Scott MacDonald, *Adventures of Perception: Cinema as Exploration* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009).

**2** For a history of this transformation, see Andrew V. Uroskie’s new book *Between the Black Box and the White Cube: Expanded Cinema and Postwar Art* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014) and Erika Balsom’s *Exhibiting Cinema in Contemporary Art* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2013).

**3** Erika Balsom, *Exhibiting Cinema in Contemporary Art*, p. 42.

**4** Rosalind Krauss, “The Cultural Logic of the Late Capitalist Museum,” *October 54* (Autumn 1990), p. 17.

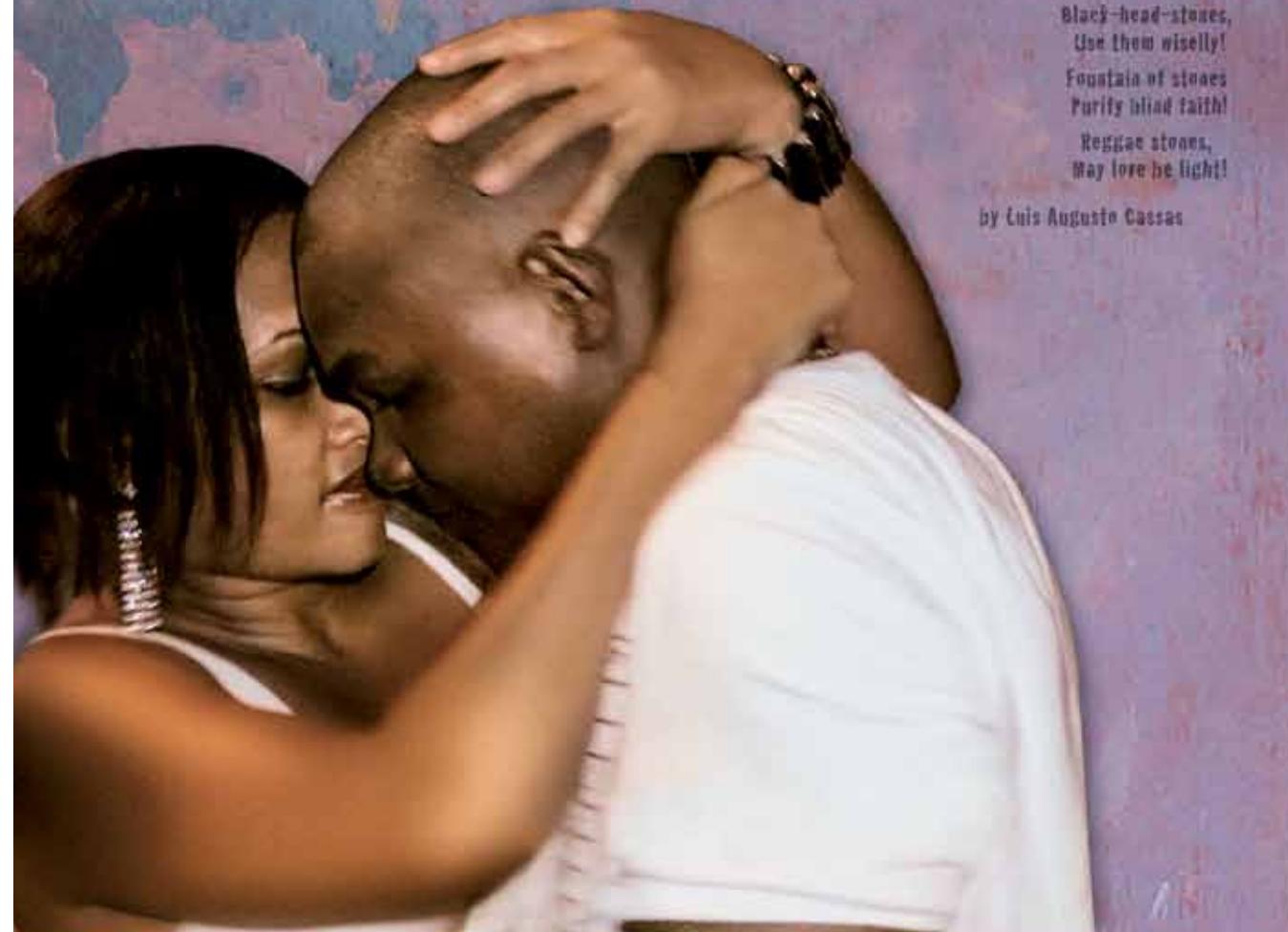
**5** Hal Foster, quoted in Yves-Alain Bois, et al., *Art Since 1900: Modernism Antimodernism Postmodernism, Volume 2: 1945 to the Present* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 2004), p. 676.

**6** Balsom, *Exhibiting Cinema in Contemporary Art*, p. 55.

**7** Frances Richard, “James Turrell and the Nonvicarious Sublime,” in *On the Sublime: Mark Rothko, Yves Klein, James Turrell*, catalogue to the exhibition at Deutsche Guggenheim Berlin, July 7-October 7, 2001 (New York: The Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, 2001), p. 89.

A Film by Christoph Janetzko

# POETRY AND REGGAE IN SÃO LUÍS



Philosophical stones,  
Protect us from evil!  
Black-head-stones,  
Use them wisely!  
Fountain of stones  
Purify blind faith!  
Reggae stones,  
May love be light!

by Luis Augusto Cassas

team: Henning Herrmann anthropological & cultural consultant, translator | José Ribamar Pereira do Nascimento second camera, production manager  
scientist: Prof. Dr. Carlos Benedito Rodrigues da Silva anthropologist, writer & reggae expert | Prof. Alberico José Jesus da Silva Carneiro literature researcher, editor, writer  
poets: Fernando José Gomes Abreu | Antonio Celso Borges Arauto | Luis Augusto Cassas | Paulo Roberto Melo Sousa  
musicians: Banda Guetos | Santa Cruz | Célia Maria Sampaio | Kazamata  
reggae-experts: Jose Raimundo da Silva | Ademar Danilo Santos Junior | Naifson Henrique Dos Santos | Glicia Helena Silva Landim  
Waldinei Wilson Souza da Silva | Prof. Marcus Vinicius Da Silva | „Garotinho Beleza”: Jordmau Emmanuel Silva & Maria Vitoria Barros da Costa  
editorial consultant: Joanna Kiernan | film music by SYMBIZ | produced by Christoph Janetzko 2014 | contact: cjmovies@online.de

created light-based sculptures and spaces that explicitly and implicitly refer to cinematic and televisual forms. As Richard has observed, Turrell's "installations acknowledge popular culture and industrial technology even as they evoke esoteric spirituality. [...] The glowing, virtual surfaces of his projection pieces and Sky Space works [...] may call to mind the purity of a transcendent void, but they might also read as oblique commentaries on film, television, and computer screens, those orphic sources of 'illumination' that lure contemporary consciousness into their insubstantial beams."<sup>9</sup>

#### SITUATING JAMES TURRELL

Turrell's experiments with light, perception, and architecture are part of a constellation of art practices in the postwar period that have paralleled and overlapped with kindred experiments by filmmakers. Turrell's work first emerged in the context of the Light and Space art of Southern California in the 1960s. Since his early participation in the Art and Technology program at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA), which paired artists with scientists and psychologists, the use of technology has been fundamental to Turrell's experiments with perception. Along with early collaborator Robert Irwin, Turrell took up residency at the Garrett Aerospace Corporation (1968-1971) in order to conduct research into perception conditioning, including the use of sensory deprivation, anechoic chambers, Ganzfelds and alpha waves. Yet while Turrell's early work is often contextualized in relation to other West Coast Light and Space artists, such as Irwin and Doug Wheeler, his work coincides with a wider generation of geographically dispersed artists who employed technology in the service of expanded perception. In the 1960s and 1970s, experimental filmmakers joined Turrell at the forefront of this bold inquiry into how technologies developed by corporations or through modern warfare might be used to serve more utopian goals.

Although West Coast Light and Space art is often distinguished from East Coast Minimalism of the same era, there are more parallels and convergences across geography and between media than have been adequately theorized. A desire to transform the conventional relationships between space, light, and perception informs much of the American art that emerged in the postwar period, on both coasts, in many media, and in countless spaces in between. Stan Brakhage's light-blasted cinema, Paul Sharits's and Tony Conrad's flicker films, Jordan Belson's cosmic light animations, Gordon Matta-Clark's aperture-like "building cuts," Yoko Ono's celestial themed "event scores," Nancy Holt's land art, Walter De Maria's "Lightning Field," and Ken Jacobs's Nervous Magic Lantern Projections are but a few examples of multimedia

work that speak to Turrell's own investigations of light, apertures, frames, architecture, and landscape.

Since the 1960s, Turrell's work has been in dialogue with both the myth and technology of cinema. As a result of collaborating with film industry lighting designer Leonard Pincus, Turrell's groundbreaking Afrum I was one of three Projection Pieces selected for the artist's pivotal one-man exhibition at the Pasadena Art Museum in 1967.<sup>10</sup> Afrum consists of a rectangle of light projected in the architectural space of a corner so that from some distance it appears to be an illuminated solid cube floating off the floor. Aspiring towards the "thingness" of light, Turrell used projection to create the illusion of three-dimensional objecthood at a moment when anti-illusionism and the specificity of objects was being insisted upon by Minimalist artists such as Donald Judd, Robert Morris, and Sol LeWitt. In this context, it is no wonder that Rosalind Krauss critiqued Turrell's illusionistic Projection Pieces for contributing to the sensory reprogramming of the postmodern subject, who had lost his sense of self and reality in a world of endlessly signifying illusions.<sup>11</sup>

Surveying his work, I have always found that Turrell's work is most profound – and paradoxically most cinematic – when he moves away from using projection as a form of illusion. Turrell created Afrum and his thirty-five other Projection Pieces in his studio in the defunct Mendota Hotel in the Ocean Park neighborhood of Santa Monica, where he had moved in 1966. His most groundbreaking work of the period was site specific, and involved his "radical fenestration" of the building itself.<sup>12</sup> Moving beyond the binary opposition between illusion and objecthood, Turrell transformed the hotel into the medium for his experiments with light. Painting all of the windows black except for small scratches that allowed tiny shards of light to cut through the space, Turrell created the Mendota Stoppages (1966), a symphonic orchestration of the flickering of light. Using the building so that it could function simultaneously as camera, projector, and theater, Turrell pioneered "the inside/ outside (light) + time equation," which, according to Frances Richard, remains Turrell's "fundamental creative theorem."<sup>13</sup> In the creation of a camera obscura that transformed illuminated traces from the outside world into perceptual phenomenon within, Turrell merged the most basic components of Los Angeles living – "driving, movies, the civic grid and the reflection of Pacific-inflected light" – in order to commute the architecture of everyday life into cinema.<sup>14</sup>

Throughout his career, Turrell's experiments with perception have continued to refer to cinematic and televisual forms even as they often invert and surpass their effects. Turrell's Magnatron series may be the

artist's most explicit allusion to popular culture. Taking the form of a small aperture cut into the wall in the shape and dimension of a mid-century television screen with two chairs set at an optimal distance for viewing, Turrell's 2001 piece Bullwinkle recreates the ambient light and white noise that served as visual and acoustic backdrop in millions of American homes since the 1950s. Inside the aperture, in a recessed space that is supposed to remain invisible to viewers, a television placed below the opening plays the Rocky and Bullwinkle cartoon. Turrell liberates the light emitted from the television apparatus from its imprisonment in narrative form, while simultaneously highlighting the ways in which televisions magnetize viewers' attention in the vacuum of mindless entertainment. Like many experimental filmmakers who work with found footage, Turrell alters the conditions of spectatorship by transmuting his source material.

While the Magnatrons reference the small format common to home viewing between the 1950s and the 1980s, Turrell's most important interventions in the expanded history of moving images reference the large scale screens of the movie palace and the immersive environments of the panorama. Turrell's Aperture works (also called Space Divisions) consist of large, light-emitting apertures cut in the wall whose horizontal, rectangular dimensions resemble the aspect ratios of standard or wide screen formats, as well as the multiple screen projections ubiquitous in the contemporary art world. Yet unlike the projection screens they echo, which imaginarily signify three dimensionality, the apparent flatness of these screens dissolve as the viewers recognize them as architectural portals that open up to immeasurable light-filled spaces. Of course, as in the *mise-en-abyme* of cinema, the perception of endless depth is illusory: the illuminated space only appears to extend infinitely. Yet rather than placing objects or textual references in abyssal relation to each other, Turrell situates the bodies of viewers themselves 'in abyss' in order to expand their perception beyond the conventional frames offered by cinema and architecture. Transfixed by the wide-screen shaped aperture of St. Elmo's Breath (1992) as the changes of light created endless variations of perception, I couldn't help but wonder how I had suddenly developed so much patience to sit and watch this luminous absence. Was it the absence of the object or the 'image' that made this experience so different from watching moving image art in a museum? The most frequent method of showing films within the gallery space often leaves a cinephile and film scholar like myself with the distressing feeling of having missed everything. Here, there is neither an "imperative" to be mobile nor a "thing" to miss.<sup>15</sup> Time is voluntary, the experience of duration non-coercive: the longer one sits, the longer one is enchanted. Whereas wide-screen

technology and fixed viewing times historically attempted to redeem the cinema from its devastating competition with television through the pleasurable disciplining of the spectator, the Aperture works redeem the act of viewing from coercion.

Moving far beyond the kitsch effects of 3-D cinema or the endless referentiality of postmodern visual culture, Turrell's immersive environments use light to transform the depth perception of viewers in ways that re-sensitize us to the wondrous, unknowable nature of the phenomenal world. Recalling the nineteenth century panoramas which were one of the many precursors to early cinema, Turrell's Ganzfelds immerse the spectator in rooms of gradually shifting, brilliant light. Through the "controlled use of light, coved corners and an inclined floor," the Ganzfelds artificially create "the phenomenon of the total loss of depth perception."<sup>16</sup> In the Ganzfelds, viewers are

**8** In her attempt to define what might constitute cinema's "medium specificity" in our era of digital technology and radical changes in exhibition practices, Balsom argues for a medium that is irreducibly multifaceted. "It encompasses single-channel works alongside multiscreen projection, film as well as video, looped exhibition and scheduled screening times, an interest in the virtuality of a represented world or in the phenomenology of spectatorship, an espousal or rejection of narrative, and works made expressly for a gallery context and those made for traditional cinematic exhibition but now transported into the white cube." Balsom, *Exhibiting Cinema in Contemporary Art*, p. 12.

**9** Richard, "James Turrell and the Nonvicarious Sublime," pp. 93-4.

**10** Richard, "James Turrell and the Nonvicarious Sublime," p. 97.

**11** Krauss, "The Cultural Logic of the Late Capitalist Museum," p. 12.

**12** Adcock, *James Turrell: The Art of Light and Space*, p. 115.

**13** Richard, "James Turrell and the Nonvicarious Sublime," p. 95.

**14** Richard, "James Turrell and the Nonvicarious Sublime," p. 96.

**15** Balsom, *Exhibiting Cinema in Contemporary Art*, p. 56.

**16** Definition from James Turrell's official website: <<http://jamesturrell.com/artworks/by-type/-type-ganzfelds>>. Accessed August 30, 2014.

invited to enter the seemingly infinite illuminated spaces that remained beyond the architectural threshold in the Aperture works. In *Breathing Light* (2013), a Ganzfeld created for the 2013 retrospective of Turrell's work at the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art, viewers queued up and waited to ascend a small staircase through which they entered a glowing architectural aperture. My partner and I waited and watched as others crossed the threshold and became corporeally reoriented. What could they possibly be experiencing in that lambent space that could so defamiliarize their movements and gestures? As Buster Keaton slips through the screen in *Sherlock Jr.* (1924), we too entered. Moving around as we explored the effects of changing light and color in the cornerless space, I felt unmoored by luminosity. Where did this space end, and how had I never experienced vision so intensely? Bathed in bluish violet light, my partner and I were electrified by the sudden appearance of each other's flesh in black and white. Seeing David as he would appear in an old movie without the mediation of lens, screen, or digital manipulation, I was mesmerized by details of his face that I had grown habituated to not seeing. Knowing but not seeing how my face had also been transformed, I experienced the wonder of perceptual mutuality. When was the last time we had gazed at each other with such rapt attention? How was it possible, after all of these years together, to see each other anew? Looking back through the threshold into the antechamber, we noticed how the once white walls had been transformed green by the orange light inside. Having been taught as a child that color is only an effect of light, I finally understood how deeply perception depends upon the relation between our physiological bodies and the environment.

In *24/7*, Jonathan Crary describes the contemporary world as a "disenchanted one" in which "the homogeneity of the present is an effect of the fraudulent brightness that presumes to extend everywhere and to preempt any mystery or unknowability."<sup>17</sup> Though artificially constructed, the luminosity of Turrell's Ganzfeld "defies the purposes of disenchantment" by working against the profound estrangement that characterizes much of our contemporary relation to technology.<sup>18</sup> There is no way to experience this without being present, but this is just a part what poet Frances Richard means by her term the "nonvicarious sublime." Through its intensification of experience, the Ganzfeld makes us aware of the immense perceiving capacity of our bodies, and thereby restores the sense of mystery that constitutes an enchanted world. Inhabiting Turrell's seemingly infinite, radiant space not only transformed our perception of depth, but also yielded a feeling of limitlessness that can only be described as "oceanic." In this seemingly spatially unbounded environment, we experience what Kaja Silverman has

so beautifully described as "the unfathomable totality of which we are a part."<sup>19</sup>

## MEETING

In the past year, there have been three major American retrospectives of Turrell's work: at the LACMA, the Guggenheim Museum in New York, and the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston. Yet rather than attempt to digest the enormous body of work exhibited at these diverse locations, I will focus the rest of this essay on an experiential engagement with the Turrell piece that I have come to know best: *Meeting*. Conceived in 1978 but not completed until 1986, *Meeting* is a site-specific installation located at the old schoolhouse in Long Island City, Queens that houses the contemporary art museum PS1. This is the Turrell of my familiar. Located on the third floor of the museum, *Meeting* is comprised of a square room with a rectangular opening cut directly into the ceiling that exposes the sky. *Meeting*, the second Skyspace created by Turrell, invites visitors to experience the changing hues of the sky as dusk approaches.

Accidentally discovering *Meeting* for the first time well over a decade ago, I had a slight sense of trepidation as I entered the room. Had I misunderstood the sign? Was I trespassing? Set unremarkably amidst the museum's administrative offices, *Meeting* catches its viewers unprepared. Upon entering, one physically detects the difference in the atmosphere before one sees or understands its source. For even before the mind can process the room's architectural distinctions, the body registers a different quality of air and temperature. A slight chill, an oddly engulfing sense of hollowness. Not realizing that an artery of the building has been slit, one nonetheless senses the free flow of air. Scanning the room to find what I am 'supposed' to look at, I see a few people assembled on and around the room's benches as if in a trance. Many are looking up, so I do as well. Amazingly, I still don't connect what I see to what I feel. A blue screen in the ceiling seems yet another clever innovation in moving image installation. After a while, a wide-winged bird soars overhead and then vanishes beyond the frame. Startled by its quick appearance, I put it together. Creating a space for people to become collectively enchanted by a new perception of the ordinary world, *Meeting* transforms the sky itself into cinema. Barbara Rubin would be pleased.

Over the years, I return, again and again. With its endlessly changing palette, *Meeting* is the exquisite color field painting for which I have been searching my entire life, a celestial stain that bleeds out its pigment every night. Even as a painter, I struggle to describe the sensations that emerge over the course of a single afternoon's viewing. Are there more words for blue or more blues for wonder? As the light deepens, one's eyes open wider to drink it. I am

a camera and the apertures of my consciousness expand. Clouds drift and meander, or gather and march. On any given day, an infinity of atmospheric variation and, simultaneously, nothing of particular note. Rather than preparing oneself to absorb the endless flow of spectacle, one re-attunes one's body to the unfolding temporality of natural light. But why catalogue the sky's 'special effects' when one might just experience them?

Inviting an audience to experience illuminated moving images and their effects on our bodies, *Meeting* is profoundly cinematic. Although it was made at the dawn of an era of the proliferation of screens in the museum, *Meeting* lacks any screen. Reformulating the relation between the body and the built environment, *Meeting* creates a meditational space for viewers to experience the ordinary majesty of celestial phenomena. Going far beyond experimental filmmaker Jordan Belson's abstract animations, Turrell's *Meeting* is a truly cosmic cinema.

Like the Lumières' early actualité films, *Meeting* re-frames the ordinary world and thus restores it to perceptibility. Yet surprisingly, *Meeting* is cinematic only by dispensing with many of the elements that traditionally comprise cinema's technological apparatus: No birds have been sent from central casting to fly at the perfect moment of periwinkle; no cameras, film, or projectors are employed in its construction. Unlike the Ganzfelds, which enhance perception by saturating the viewer in unnatural light, *Meeting* involves a desaturation and stripping away. In contrast to what Krauss critiqued as a "hyperspace," this simple chamber refuses to house any illusions that might contribute to what Frederic Jameson theorized as "the hysterical sublime."<sup>20</sup> In its simplicity of construction and modest mode of address, *Meeting* is an antidote to that hysteria and the fragmented and technologized subjects that it helps to generate.

Of course, this is not to say that there is no apparatus. Recall that early films weren't considered cinema until they got out of the box (kinescope) and into a space that could sustain collective viewing. Whereas the radical shifts in cinema's architectures of exhibition that have occurred over the last two decades often produce dissatisfying engagements with moving image artworks, Turrell's meticulous attention to the architecture of perception is in large part how he creates such wondrous effects. However dematerialized light may be, our perception of it is nonetheless abetted and altered by material forms. Turrell knows and doesn't try to deny the fact that what we perceive depends upon, and changes, based upon how we perceive it. Certain simple architectural elements of what we used to call the cinema deliberately shape the relationship between perception and space: after moving through a threshold denoting the theater from the rest of the building, one encounters

seats, a frame, and house lighting. Built-in plywood benches lining the periphery of the room invite viewers not to pass through but rather to dwell. Artificial lights installed at the top of the room produce an orange glow that intensifies the deepening indigo of the penumbral sky. Belying the piece's significant hardware, including a gliding door on the roof that seals the room during closing hours and inclement weather, the beveled edge of the aperture makes it appear as if the plaster that frames our view is no thicker than a slice of paper.

Yet even with these interventions, *Meeting* fulfills André Bazin's oft-maligned dream: here, the image has truly become the object.<sup>21</sup> This is not a representation of celestial illumination, but rather the sky itself. Such an encounter with the real is bound to bewilder. *Meeting* inverts Plato's allegory of the cave. Rather than misperceiving projections for reality, I misperceive reality for a projection. So accustomed am I to illusion.

## BEING IN TIME

Temporarily removed from the rush of contemporary life, our experience of time changes. One rests without waiting. Even I, incorrigible jitterbug, become moth. I want nothing so much as to stay, to linger by the light. Unlike the bad habits I have developed watching moving image installation, here I do not wait with baited breath for the unknown to happen so that I can consume it and be on my way. After all, what happens is easily anticipated: eventually, it gets dark. Duration, so often wielded as a weapon in contemporary art, intensifies and prolongs the experience but it does not determine it. Unlike the

<sup>17</sup> Jonathan Crary, *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep* (New York: Verso: 2013), p. 19.

<sup>18</sup> Jeffrey L. Kosky, *Arts of Wonder: Enchanting Secularity--Walter DeMaria, Diller + Scofidio, James Turrell, Andy Goldsworthy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), p. 94. Here, Kosky is not referring specifically to the Ganzfelds, but to Turrell's larger practice.

<sup>19</sup> Kaja Silverman, *Flesh of My Flesh* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), p. 28.

<sup>20</sup> Krauss, "The Cultural Logic of the Late Capitalist Museum," p. 12. Quoting Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, Or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, Duke University Press, 1990), p. 34.

<sup>21</sup> André Bazin, "The Ontology of the Photographic Image," in *What is Cinema? Volume One*, ed. and trans. Hugh Gray (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), pp. 9-16.

continuously looping video in the gallery space, there is a start and end time to the artwork that varies based upon seasonal changes and the weather: Meeting does not open until late afternoon and closes after dusk. While Turrell intends for viewers to experience the entire transformation of the sky as day turns to night, one is welcome but not obliged to stay this long. Yet even when one fails to experience Turrell's ideal conditions of viewing, one's perception of time is nonetheless transformed by the workaday contingencies of this makeshift temple in the metropolis.

Jonathan Crary has recently theorized the "24/7" world of twenty-first century capitalism as being defined by a principle of nonstop activity that is equally indifferent to the daily rotation of the planet and the fragility of human life. In an environment that disavows its relation to the natural rhythms of life, human beings are re-regulated to adjust their internal, organic clocks to the "uninterrupted operation of markets [and] information networks."<sup>22</sup> While a "24/7 environment has the semblance of a social world," Crary argues that it actually suspends living by making it conform to machinic modes of production. Moving beyond the clock time of the industrial age, the 24/7 world "undermines [the] distinctions between day and night, between light and dark, and between action and repose."<sup>23</sup> In a late capitalist world hostile to unproductivity, even periods of rest have come under siege.

Offering a place of repose and regeneration in which perceivers become re-aligned with the "daily rotation of the planet" and re-sensitized to the "embeddedness" of even the most urban lives in the natural alternations between light and darkness, Meeting defies the "static redundancy" of time that characterizes late capitalism.<sup>24</sup> Turrell is not the only artist – filmmaker or otherwise – to be concerned with marking time. Made in 1964, Andy Warhol's notorious film *Empire* is an 8 hour and five minute silent film of New York City's Empire State Building, shot with an immobile camera from "around sunset to the very dead of night."<sup>25</sup> An epic exercise in duration, as well as a marvelously meditative experience for those who actually experience the film in its entirety, *Empire* is, like Meeting, an exploration of what happens to our perception of light-mediated-by-architecture as it changes over time. As in Wallace Stevens's poem "Anecdote of the Jar," in these works an aspect of the built environment – a skyscraper, a window – function as the control through which the wilderness of the darkening surround is framed and becomes perceivable.<sup>26</sup> More recently, Christian Marclay's astonishing 24-hour epic *The Clock* (2010) meticulously arranges scenes from movies and television that explicitly reference the passage of clock time so that the film installation progresses in "real time"

over the course of an entire day and night. Encouraging viewers to remain vigilant for a full twenty-four hours in order to perceive the ceaseless mechanized wonders of keeping time in a new spectacular form, Marclay's work embodies the 24/7 ethic of the world in which we live.

#### VARIETIES OF RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

James Turrell's Meeting is a departure from that world, and a welcome reminder of our relation to the organic time of the cosmos. Rejecting the incessant activity demanded by late capitalism, Meeting remakes the museum into a "site of sanctuary from the determinations of the market" and the mechanized temporality that it insists upon.<sup>27</sup> By inviting viewers to sit for an extended time and attune themselves to our movement in the solar system, Meeting refuses the imperative to be mobile that Balsom and Crary critique. As in the Buddhist meditational practice of sitting, unrushed occupation of the gallery space allows participants to refocus on rhythms of the body and the analogous inhalation of breath and absorption of light (thematized in the Ganzfeld's title *Breathing Light*). As in much of Turrell's work, the light in Meeting cleanses. One discovers that it is possible to perceive the world anew simply by slowing down and experiencing it.

Turrell has observed that by framing the sky, Meeting brings it down to us: "A lot of times, we look at the sky, thinking it would be far away," he writes, "but I make these spaces [...] which bring the sky right down on the top of the space where you're in, so it's no longer far away, you're in close contact with it." But, in spite of Turrell's suggestions to the contrary, the perception of unrealizable distance and magnitude is essential to Meeting's impact. The sky might be right above us, but even with the aerospace technology that Turrell often uses, it cannot be mastered or archived. The world exceeds us, and yet we are part of it. The perception of aura in Turrell's most modest works does not depend upon the mystification of the audience but upon the cultivation of our own capacity for perception beyond the limiting patterns of the socio-cultural environment.

Critics have made much of Turrell's Quaker upbringing, and in Meeting the title foregrounds the relationship between spirituality, perception, and communality. While Turrell has constructed a Skyspace that serves as a Quaker Meeting House (the Live Oak Friends Meeting House in Houston, Texas), PSI's more secular Meeting encourages a different way of being together. While not everybody observes the silence that may or not may be intended, some variety of religious experience happens when we are together in that room. While I would like to claim that nobody ever checks their phones when they are in there, it is simply not true.

Regardless, a strange calm settles. From the moment one enters, one is engulfed by a sense of collective extrospection. A sense of being together emerges in spite of our tendency towards distraction, and it slowly re-integrates us. Mind you, I am not trying to claim that Meeting dissolves our cynicism or returns us to the kind of innocent state of perception that Stan Brakhage fantasized about in *Metaphors on Vision*.<sup>28</sup> After all, this would be the most escapist contrivance of all. By providing world enough and time to become conscious of our embodied kinship with the "flesh of the world," Meeting catalyzes a different relation to being.<sup>29</sup>

In Christopher Isherwood's 1952 novel *The World in the Evening*, the narrator is a lapsed Quaker who is deeply cynical about the presumptions of his former religion. In spite of his reluctance, he is compelled to visit a spiritual Meeting with his aunt, and, to his surprise, finds himself deeply moved by the experience. Isherwood's gorgeous description of this character's re-awakening vividly reminds me of my own experience of Turrell's work: "[...] the silence, in its odd way, was coming to life. Was steadily filling up the bare white room, like water rising in a tank. Every one of us contributed to it, simply by being present. Togetherness grew and tightly enclosed us, until it seemed that we must all be breathing in unison and keeping time with our heartbeats. It was massively alive and, somehow, unimaginably ancient, like the togetherness of Man in the primeval caves..."<sup>30</sup>

In the twentieth century, the cinema often functioned as a variety of religious experience for a secular audience that nonetheless needed the spiritual balm of enchanted collectivity. In our digital era, in which the collective viewing of cinema has been eroded by the profusion of personal viewing devices and the re-placing of cinema's architectures of exhibition, the communal basis of cinema continues to lose ground. I do not mourn the great temples of the silver screen as much as I mourn their function as conduits of togetherness. Whatever blessings our virtual networks have brought us, they have ravaged the non-virtual sense of collectivity that was so sustaining at the movies and elsewhere. While we certainly don't need cinema to appreciate the magnificent work of James Turrell, perhaps cinema might learn something valuable from Turrell's re-imagining of a perceiving public. For although cinema always relied upon technology, its magic was never in the can.

**22** Crary, 24/7, p. 8, p. 9. Crary quotes Teresa Brennan's term "bioderegulation" from *Globalization and Its Terrors: Daily Life in the West* (London: Routledge, 2003), pp. 19-22.

**23** Crary, 24/7, p. 9, p. 17.

**24** Crary, 24/7, p. 14, p. 11, pp. 8-9.

**25** J.J. Murphy, *The Black Hole of the Camera: The Films of Andy Warhol* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), p. 30.

**26** Wallace Stevens, "Anecdote of the Jar," *Harmonium* (New York: Knopf, 1923).

**27** Balsom, *Exhibiting Cinema in Contemporary Art*, p. 31.

**28** Stan Brakhage, "Metaphors on Vision," *Essential Brakhage: Selected Writings on Film-Making* by Stan Brakhage (Kingston, NY: McPherson, 2001). In the opening to "Metaphors on Vision," Brakhage famously asks us to: "Imagine an eye unruly by man-made laws of perspective, an eye unprejudiced by compositional logic, an eye which does not respond to the name of everything but which must know each object encountered in life through an adventure of perception. How many colors are there in a field of grass to the crawling baby unaware of 'Green'? How many rainbows can light create for the untutored eye? How aware of variations in heat waves can that eye be? Imagine a world alive with incomprehensible objects and shimmering with an endless variety of movement and innumerable gradations of color. Imagine a world before the 'beginning was the word.'" Brakhage, *Essential Brakhage*, p. 12.

**29** Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, ed. Claude Lefort, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1968), p. 139.

**30** Christopher Isherwood, *The World in the Evening* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), p. 42.

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