

Robert Irwin
On the Periphery of Knowing
(Interview by Jan Butterfield) (1976)

After creating paintings in the mode of Abstract Expressionism and Minimalism in the late 1950s and early 1960s, Robert Irwin stopped making objects altogether and began to think about ways in which he could make the viewer aware of the fundamental links between experience, perception, and consciousness. In the early 1970s Irwin began to alter pre-existing built environments by painting specific areas within the space and/or setting up walls out of semitranslucent scrim. By subtly altering the conditions of space and light in a given environment, Irwin accentuates the viewer's awareness of that space. Irwin views perception as directly connected to consciousness. So if the viewer is placed in a situation in which his perceptual faculties are challenged, then there is potential for the viewer's consciousness to be altered as well.

Irwin is interested in ways in which artists can make people aware of how they construct their own realities. In the interview "On the Periphery of Knowing," which was published in *Arts Magazine* in February 1976, Irwin talks about the need for art to expand beyond the current cultural dialog. Artists must be aware of the limitations of a given system. This is best achieved by pushing art to what he calls "the periphery of knowing"; it is here that art is involved with inquiry and not with conclusions.

"We are given to organizing and structuring," Irwin wrote in an unpublished manuscript in 1973. "We physically organize ourselves and our environments but more critically, we organize our perceptions of the physical world into abstract structures—our minds directing our sensory apparatus as much as our sensory apparatus informs our minds. Our reality is confined to our ideas about reality."

All too often those structures which are created for practice are so defined as to exclude experimental, erratic, or even innovative information. Long interested in Irwin's inquiry into the nature of things, and in what way it could, or if it could affect existing structures, I have followed the progression of his ideas and activities with interest, and sometimes with difficulty; his route is far from linear.

Toward the end of the 1960s, as his theoretical position was honed and shaped, the artist maintained a low public profile, producing no "tangible" works. Then, beginning with an untitled and unlabeled piece or "situation" executed at The Museum of Modern Art in 1970, there has been a gradual proliferation of scrim pieces and other environmental works executed as "responses," always at the instigation of the institution.

The most recent public works deal with a range of very different perceptual concerns; executed as "responses," they vary with each situation. In November and December in California three works were available: at Long Beach

State College, at Mizuno Gallery in Los Angeles, and at the La Jolla Museum of Art. At Long Beach, a large-scale white "window" was created outside, filling the entire breezeway between two buildings. Clearly a frame, it set up a situation in which the viewer found it necessary to shift his sense of focus from real to pictorial to real space in such a way as to become acutely conscious of the activities which took place "within" it. The work was very much about questioning of our systems of focus, an integral part of Irwin's inquiry.

At Mizuno Gallery, a work of great power obliterated the space, becoming instead the space itself. Alternately a void and a volume, it was at once empty—and loaded with information. In it, Irwin's now-familiar scrim, stretched tight from the ceiling, had an almost blue tonality. Held taut by a black metal bar/band, its "real" physical presence ended somewhere below the participant's eye level. A mirror image of that black band appeared on the floor beneath it, extending up the walls to the edge of the scrim, forming a clear, clean rectangle. Volumetrically, the piece reversed itself out as the space above the black bar came into shape perceptually as a solid, and then suddenly slipped out of focus, causing the void below to take on the real "reality." Taut, powerful, the sensibility of the piece changed several times through the day as the light paled and yellowed, and the work took on a rounded, softened sensibility with yet another kind of perceptual hum than that created by its early "blueness."

At the La Jolla Museum, Irwin created perhaps the simplest and most "gentle" of his scrim pieces to date. In a low-ceilinged gallery room, the walls of which appeared to be cream, the piece began softly up from the nubby carpet and encased the entire end of the room—track lights, molding, corners and all, in a soft, muted cocoon.

JB: What is your definition of what "Art" consists of?

RI: I have certain reservations about the "outside" in terms of holding or making some clarification or definition for what art is specifically. First of all, there is no way that a definition can be anything more than a cultural agreement, a matter of placing our collective attention or a certain amount of our energies towards an activity for gaining an aesthetic awareness. But this art is not an inevitable thing, since art has no *actual* physical attributes other than the ones that we give to it as a kind of statement (temporary) about the condition of our understanding of art at that moment in our culture. There is no "Art" until we make an agreement and a cultural definition. This is reflective of the cultural state of mind at that point in time concerning its own ideas about its own aesthetic consciousness. Now we have an "Art," but not an art per se. The first thing you have to recognize is that "Art" is a cultural dialogue, and remains solely that until you take it to the periphery of that dialogue.

That dialogue makes a great deal of sense when you take up the boundaries for the idea of a cultural identification and assume art to operate in relation to those boundaries or those ideas or those givens about what art is, and through performance gain historical precedents, philosophical assumptions, and intellectual concepts as such. These are all the context boundaries of what art operates *in*, and *with*,

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and *against*. Take that and put it right in the middle of a cultural space like a city or a room, a cultural environment, one that has already been bounded, cut up, divided, systematized, ordered, or organized by any system or logic, attitude, aesthetic, or historical precedent. Then, *that* art is immediately operative in *that* world. For example, that each mark in the arena of painting can be immediately measured with and against the whole history of painting and of knowns, is a marvelous expediency, and it most likely makes good sense in that world, but the minute you take it out of that world, and really put it in the world of the complexity of nature—in the world of atoms or light, mind, or consciousness—it can become very arbitrary. And, if there are some things we do not yet know, you have to *begin* examining the assumption "Art." This "Art" is as much an act of identification of our effect on the nature of things, leaving our record and acquiring control and function of aesthetics, as having to do with aesthetics *per se*.

JB: Do you, then, think you *can* define "Art"?

RI: The closest I have come to one is to say that art is *the placing of your attention on the periphery of knowing*. It is a state of mind, ultimately. If there ever could be such a thing as a total or "cosmic" consciousness, then there would be no periphery of knowing, because we would be *all-knowing*. There would also be no "Art"—but simply "being." However, we do not have that consciousness; our awareness of art or aesthetics is in direct proportion to the kind and degree of investments we make in them. That art, that state of mind, that attention is what is meant by a "state of real." As Ad Reinhardt said, "Art is art, as art and everything else is everything else." Taking that definition, there is no difference based on methodology or language or discipline. The critical distinction for art lies in the *intention* art. Those aesthetic games we play are simply cultural practice. This "Art," as I am defining it now, could be held to be the same in every discipline. There are those interested in placing their attention on the periphery of knowing and act of inquiry, those who are interested in placing it in that state of mind necessary for practice, and still others who are concerned with the history of cultural successes. The distinctions could be held exactly the same for every discipline. We may hold *more* in common across disciplinary lines by *intention*, than we do by common methodology. What confuses things is that each of us begins as a practitioner, develops and understands the system by coming up through the ranks and the confusion begins.

JB: I like that statement you made before to the effect that "My art may be obscure, but it is not elite."

RI: This is the reasoning behind some of the practices I am now engaged in . . . which is part of how I have been defining my activities. I see the principal difference between elitism and obscurity as *availability*. Even though the concept may remain obscure for some time, and few understand what you are saying, *if* it is totally available for as much as anybody can, or is willing to deal with it, then it is not elite.

JB: That begins to clarify much of your recent activity—your reasons for going anywhere and everywhere whenever anyone has asked you to lecture.

RI: There are two parts to that; one was the simple availability without conditions, and the second was that if ideas *begin* obscure, they may also be eccentric to our existing structures, and then it becomes absolutely necessary that you then begin to examine the processes and systems of assimilation that are already operative.

I've begun by circumventing the normal channels for this communication which are too limiting by taking on a very old concept: that new ideas are best considered *live*, in a dialectic.

JB: We have not been able to allow within the art structure difference of attitude and activity. *Your* life is very different from *my* life; you function one way, I function another way, but there is no "right" or "wrong" to either of those methods of procedure.

RI: Why confine the questions simply to art? There are no social systems conceived to encourage diversity of opinion either. Perception is ultimately a question of individual responsibility. It is to gain that diversity that modern art brought us to individually question the processes and limitations of an organized collective consciousness as form. Much/most of what is viewed as "Art" is not in any way a development or an extension of the human consciousness or knowledge of the dialogue per se. It is instead the development of a larger segment of the culture's consciousness of what we commonly refer to as communications towards the assimilation of an idea which has already existed for some time in art as inquiry. In line with this, it is interesting to note that the Cubists were unable to live directly with the consequences of their ideas, which is a way of saying how deeply those ideas could come to affect our lives.

JB: Give me an example of art as innovation.

RI: The germane ideas in Cubism. The shorting of that system of values that structured prevalent thought, followed by the social adjustments of Dada and Surrealism, carried to their appropriate conclusions in painting by the generating of Abstract-Expressionist ideas such as Reinhardt's "I'm simply painting the last painting that anyone can ever paint." The idea of a less structured view of the world—the flatness of figure and ground in Cubism—was culturally applied by the Pop artists, and is being further acted out by Andy Warhol. This is an amoral view of the world from a traditional perspective.

Cultural innovation usually consists of the new idea couched in an old form, in this case, a less structured perspective carved in figurative painting. This is the crux of innovation: context. New Realism is the same process now carried a step further culturally, a broader figuration, one that everyone can see, and a corresponding modification of the germane ideas. Cultures do not assimilate ideas whole, nor do they assimilate them *immediately* as causal connecting social activities would like to believe.

JB: Within that context, how do you see art's dilemma at this point in time?

RI: As sophisticated as we think we are, our systems of measure and innovation have uncovered no real way to deal with data at its inception. Only in the hands of the individual does the system participate in the early recognition of art culturally, and only in myth do we hold a place for art per se. What we measure, and this is the concern of historians, are the cultural overlaps and consistencies of our cultural contexts conceded to be answers. The artist, on the other hand, begins seeking the *inconsistencies* and his inquiry is process related first to his questions, and only in time is carried to performance. As performance closes in on itself, as it becomes resolution, its definitions/boundaries raise new questions about those potentials eccentric to the conclusion.

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question is "What do you want, or need to know?" This is the economics of our investment/intention in life, that we can't know everything, and while we may have accepted the idea that things must be orderly, the paradoxes for our perception are simply not resolvable as we live them. I don't know where we got that limited idea of order in the first place.

Any useful concept in time is carried to underwrite some act or physical existence in the world. That existence in time can come to be seen as some form of precedence. Any precedent can in time come to be seen as some form of truth and truth in time can be held to be moral. A precedent is a truth rooted in history. The abstraction of our concepts is never totally static and is constantly compounding, independent of its original election in the world and takes on a life of its own.

JB: If people are to learn to recognize the limitations within a given system and to attempt to learn to work with it or within it, but not see it as a "universal," how do they begin?

RI: You have to learn to recognize that you are philosopher, innovator, practitioner, traditionalist, historian, and participant. You are all those things, and you are capable of determining the differences in context and form which those perspectives bring to things. All of them *are* you, and they are all true, reflecting only your complexity and potential in the world. We seem to do a lot of unreasonable things in the guise of order simply to avoid the real complexity. It is in this idea of conclusions that we lose sight of our potential.

JB: How is the cognizance of all of this reflected in your own work?

RI: There are five areas of involvement for me right now. One level is my own writing, which aspires to participate at the root of Structuralist thought, the presentation and concepts argued in the form of ideas. Next are my involvements with projects like Josh Young's Market Street Program, a system of innovation/selection which operates without an opinion (i.e., bias of expertise), my work with Dr. Wortz on habitability, and the series of "Responses" I will continue to execute at the Fort Worth Art Museum over a year-and-a-half period of time. Concerning the questions for context, they represent my inquiry into systems building or reordering by building new tools, and expanding the context by which information is organized. Social interaction with students and artists also plays an important role in my activity right now, which goes back again to that thing of availability.

The fourth area of activity is one which overlaps the existing structures in a very real way. Exhibitions of new works such as those in my recent exhibitions at the Chicago Museum of Contemporary Art, the pieces at the La Jolla Museum, Mizuno Gallery, and Cal State Long Beach, etc., all acknowledge the disciplinary dialogue that constitutes what we term "Art" in the cultural sense. The fifth area of activity is personal and probably the closest to where my interest is right now: the pieces I have done in the desert and in cityscapes which no one has seen, which are my own root inquiry.

JB: Have you mapped or marked those pieces in any way, or is their purpose strictly one of inquiry?

RI: They are a means of inquiry. I don't want to simply convert them to systems like maps and markings and photographs and so forth. They represent good questions and I arrived at them reasonably and I want to *leave* them there. I want them to stay in the air as questions.