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An Interview with James Turrell

On January 23, 1983, just after completion of *Batten*, his new installation in the Hayden Gallery at MIT, James Turrell talked with Kathy Halbreich, Lois Craig, and William Porter representing *Places*. For James Turrell, space, objects, the materials of the earth, distance, and even time are not only revealed by light, they are illusions created by light. For nearly two decades, he has explored light through site-specific installations in California, New York, and Italy. He also has carried out a series of explorations involving how people perceive light, with a background that includes an undergraduate major in psychology and an avid avocation of flying small aircraft. His most ambitious current project is the transformation of the Roden Crater near Sedona, Arizona, that will include a “sun and moon viewing room.” Like ambiguous figure-ground drawings, his works alternate between presenting themselves and serving merely as illusionary media through which external reality and an observer’s own perceptions become evident. This ambiguity is integral to the extraordinary power of Turrell’s places.

Places: Are you meant to feel transcendent in the installations you’ve created?

Turrell: What do you mean by transcendent?

Places: One almost leaves one’s body through one’s body because one is made so sensitive to how one is sensing.

Turrell: I do like that you are sensing and that it’s nonvicarious; it’s about your seeing and you know it’s about your seeing. You can decide you don’t want to deal with it but if you do engage it, there is something to engage.

Places: The only way you cannot engage places that have power is by leaving them . . . but does one’s arrival play a role?

Turrell: The Grand Canyon is one of those places. It’s possible to come up to the canyon in such a way that you don’t even know you’re arriving, and then suddenly burst upon it. I like to fly up the Colorado River to this canyon which you have to climb into through a tiny valley. I fly through the bottom of that valley in a slow climb to a small opening; as you fly through the opening, boom, suddenly you’re in it, and the ground falls away for 5,000 feet.

So the approach can order your experience. You can come in through the side door of one of the places we’re considering and have a different experience than if you enter through the front

door; you can reorder it as you get in, but entry is important. We do learn in this culture not to see afterimages. But in any situation your previous experience is important. If you went from a rather pink room into a very pale green one, at first the intensity of the green would be very high because you loaded that green room with a green afterimage that came from seeing the pink room. Size matters too. Coming through an opening into a big space—in Canyon de Chelly, for example, there are some areas like this. Conversely, there are natural places that wouldn’t have power were something man-made not there. Borobudur and Split have this quality. . . . I think one of our greatest conceits is to feel we’re not a part of nature. We feel victimized by technology. Well, we’re technology: It’s as though the coral that creates the Great Barrier Reef were appalled by the coral. The Great Barrier Reef *is* coral. We build cities, and that’s what we *are*. We’re crustaceans that make these shells we inhabit. You can see New York from space about as well as you see the Great Barrier Reef.

Places: How do you see your crater being in phase with nature?

Turrell: Well, more like Persepolis or Split, where the built environment works with the siting. This is a

volcano, and it will remain so.

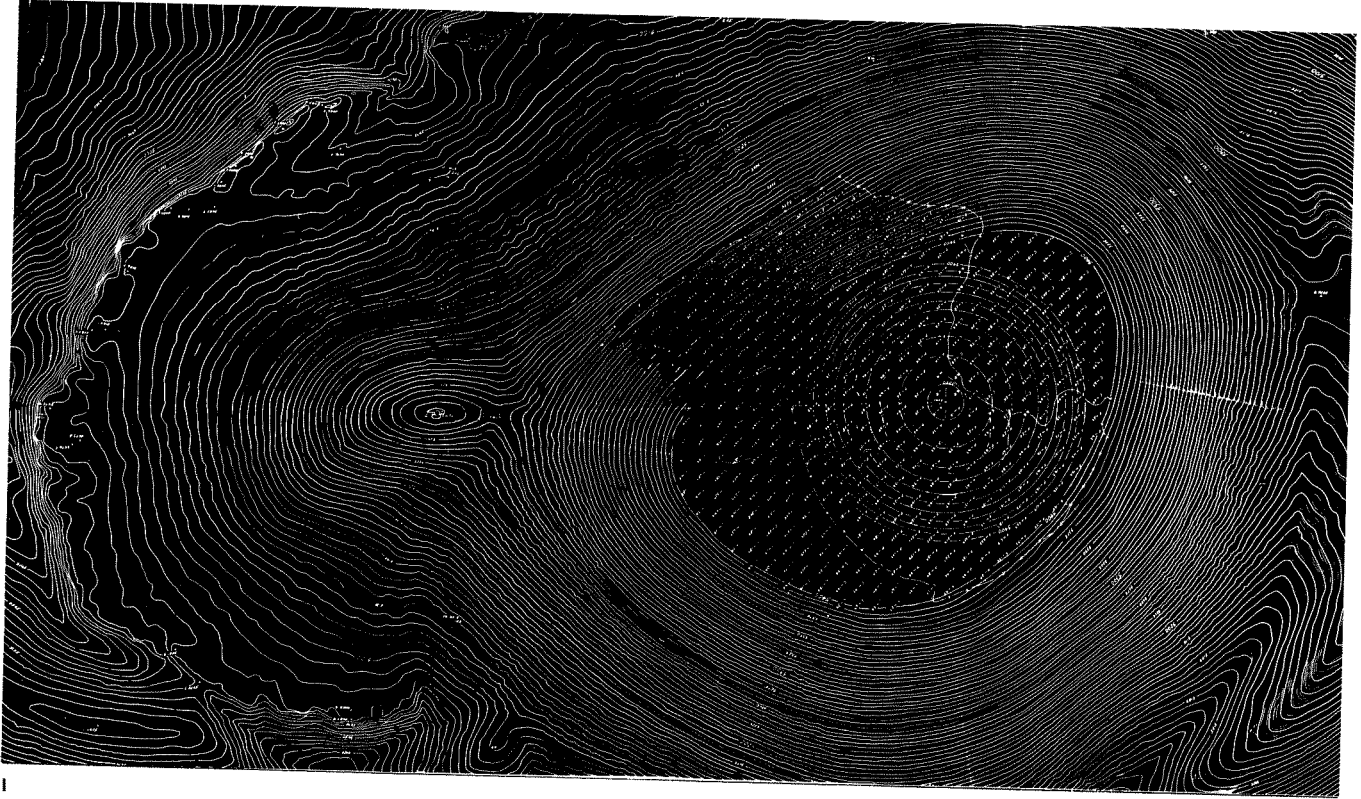
Places: What about the materials used to make the crater?

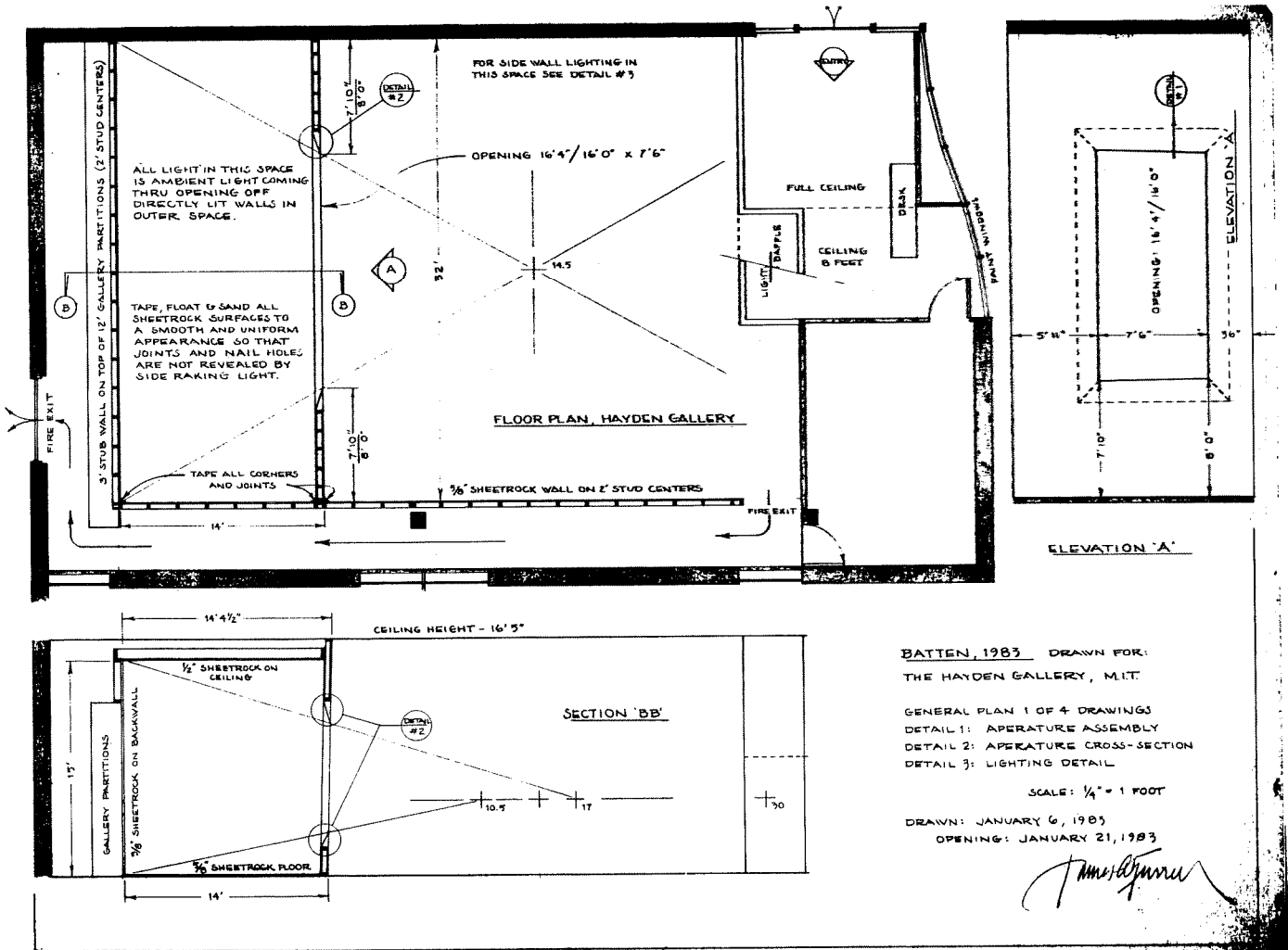
Turrell: There are lots of materials right there, so there’s an economy in using them. Some of the great material producers are cinder cones. They are used for cinderblock and for all kinds of aggregate, sand such as silica—pure black silica—and obsidian. . . . Cinder is a wonderful material . . . almost as hard as glass, and yet it’s light and has wonderful insulating properties because it contains air. . . . It also is reasonable to use those materials to make the place itself. . . . For instance, we are making plaster out of the different kinds of sand so that the plaster takes on the color of that sand; then we are sandblasting the plaster walls with that same sand and leaving 18 to 24 inches of sand on the floor . . .

Many of the pieces I originally made were like this piece at MIT, but you were on the other side—inside it. Those spaces were pretty hard to maintain because the floor had to be painted and kept clean, and if you asked people to take off their shoes, in many cities—and New York is one of them—people would get very put out.

Places: So, in the crater, you’re on the other side.

Turrell: Yes. You would be





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2 Batten: a line drawing by the artist

on the inside, and the space you stand in for the MIT piece would be like the sky of low horizon for the crater spaces. There will be some spaces, however, where you can look in from both sides, even though they will be powered from the sky.

Places: In the crater the natural events provide a tremendous variety of source material, whereas in the gallery it's . . .

Turrell: It's fixed. But basically, the image created by the four light bulbs in the gallery is about eight and one half feet. It softens out, as you may have noticed, because it is directed away. In the crater that would be the image of the moon, so that when it came into one space it did something in another space. In one space an event creates image and that image then makes space in a space right next to it. It's no different from the interrelationship of spaces created in time and music.

Turrell: I was very interested in a site that was on a flat plane. This crater stands off by itself and comes out of a plane that is the Painted Desert. One of the first descriptions of that sort of space that excited me was by Antoine de Saint Exupéry. He talked about flight spaces and spaces in the sky. He also talked about the fact that from 600 to 3,000 feet up the earth looks as though it curves the wrong way. A little higher, it looks level, and finally at 18,000

feet the real curvature of the earth can be seen. But the way we sense was not made for flight spaces, obviously, so when we move into that realm there are glitches where our sensing doesn't work as well as it might.

The reason I'm making the tunnel [up into the bowl of the crater] is so that you don't go up a mountain and down in a hole. It has a lot to do with entry . . . as you go up the tunnel you only see sky, you don't see the other side of the crater. It is important to me that when you enter the crater space, you walk along into it, and as you walk along the edge of the crater, the earth seems to curve the wrong way—which happens because of our sensing. I wanted this sort of space blown out from underneath you.

Places: What about strong, impressive places that you're not sure you really want to know about because of their oppressive associations?

Turrell: For me one of the most interesting structures to look at is the Siegfried Maginot Line. I love the quality of those bunkers, their mass. What I like best, and this has to do with my work in the crater, is that this space is designed entirely from the outside . . . the inside is made for this thing outside. In the same way I'm interested in Jai Singh's observatory where the structures are formed completely in relationship to events that occurred in that space in the heavens.

Places: They're a viewing chamber . . .

Turrell: Exactly. They're only interested in events that occur in that space. That's why the Pyramids are much more interesting to me than Stonehenge. A pyramid is a structure with an opening to an event outside. The light enters down the shaft only once a year and lights a figure of one of the pharaohs full on. Stonehenge is like siting stones; that is, you stand in it and you site the external events. In Egyptian structures, phenomena enter the space and actually make a lighting event inside. That space is sensitive to events from places outside itself and when an event occurs outside that you want inside, it enters the space and does something. It's the *camera obscura*. In a way, the camera is the room and that's really a sensitive space. Bunker architecture also is sensitive because this space contains an opening to look out to or to deal with the events, and then there's a space inside.

Places: Push the idea of the camera a little more. In the crater there are certain events which occur externally, like the moon rising at a certain time of year, which, in fact, will be displayed as a virtual image in that chamber itself.

Turrell: Yes. Basically what I am doing with the crater is that I'm working with the interior and exterior space, that is, the working of one space against another.

Generally an aspect of that space is charged and related to how that space is filled. This quality of how the light inhabits the space changes throughout the day. Occasionally certain events will penetrate two or three openings and create image in the space. This image will destroy this sense of space in the space in which it happens but it also will create a sense of space in the one next to it.

Places: Can you describe a little more what you mean by "image"?

Turrell: When you see defined image—it has edge—you actually see the surface.

Places: If we were to use the Hayden Gallery installation as a model, your image is where the light hits the wall on the left or the right, from those two flood lights on either side.

Turrell: Yes, it's direct light—direct light on a surface—and direct light generally will define surface. Ambient light, if it's not penetrated by direct light, can define space. Here at the Hayden Gallery there's a space that has direct light in it and it's like space as we always see it. But the space next to it is filled with ambient light only which will define space if the space is properly sized to the amount of light and its color tone. . . . When I see how fragile it is, though, it's quite surprising. You just turn on one little light and, boom, it's gone, just like that. I

think these pieces have a lot to do with time.

Places: You're really challenging the 15-minute museum experience. There is a requirement, there's a demand in this to be somewhere.

Turrell: Well, if you don't do that, then, it's just the emperor's clothes. Either you do the work or you forget it. There is a price of admission and most people don't pay it.

Places: A source of power is that delicate balance between image and ambiance, between human intervention and natural condition. An imbalance seems to destroy it.

Turrell: I think that's quite true. Does Brazilia succeed? Borobudur, Split, and Persepolis work in phase with their surroundings in an amazing way. You could make a Split and maybe it wouldn't be anything. Art becomes totally incidental to what is there. Often it's in opposition.

Places: When you come to some of these spaces or places which were created in other cultures, you're actually perceiving them quite differently from the people that live in that culture.

Turrell: I think it's fair to say you are. That's not to say that they're any less powerful. We find Indian blankets quite impressive, but they don't function for us in the same way they did



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for the people that wore and used them.

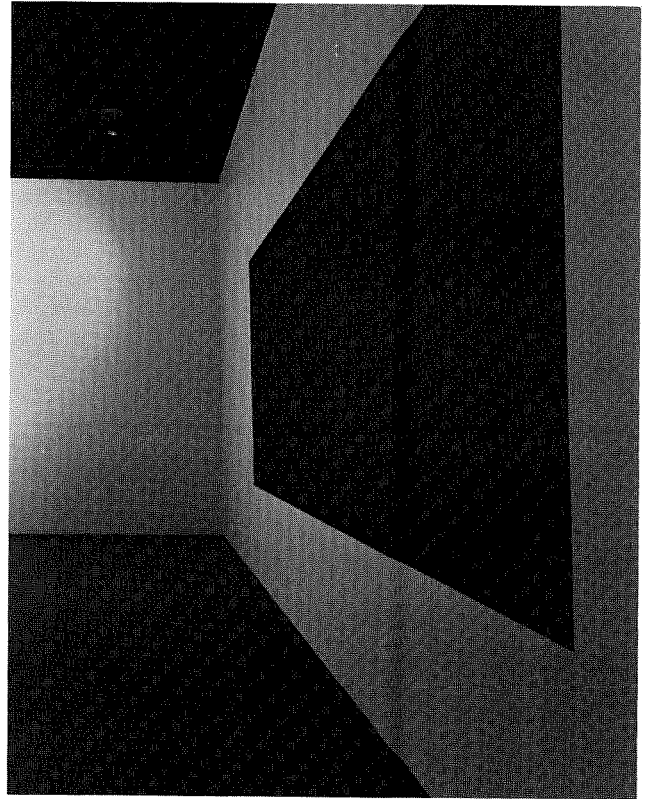
Places: In the crater as one is going through this sequence of spaces, will one also be going through a sequence of materials?

Turrell: Definitely, and all the materials are from that area. The sands are collected from the Painted Desert and the variety of sands available is extraordinary.

Places: How will you make a decision as to which sand is appropriate for which space?

Turrell: It depends on which event that space is oriented to. There is a sand that is the same color as you see flying over the desert on a full moon night. I want to house the events and have color tones appropriate to them. . . . For instance, there's one light event that's very important to me: the rise of the earth's shadow.

When the sun goes down in the West and you look to the East on a clear day you'll see this pink line, with white silvery-blue below. Actually, you're looking at the earth's shadow advancing up in the

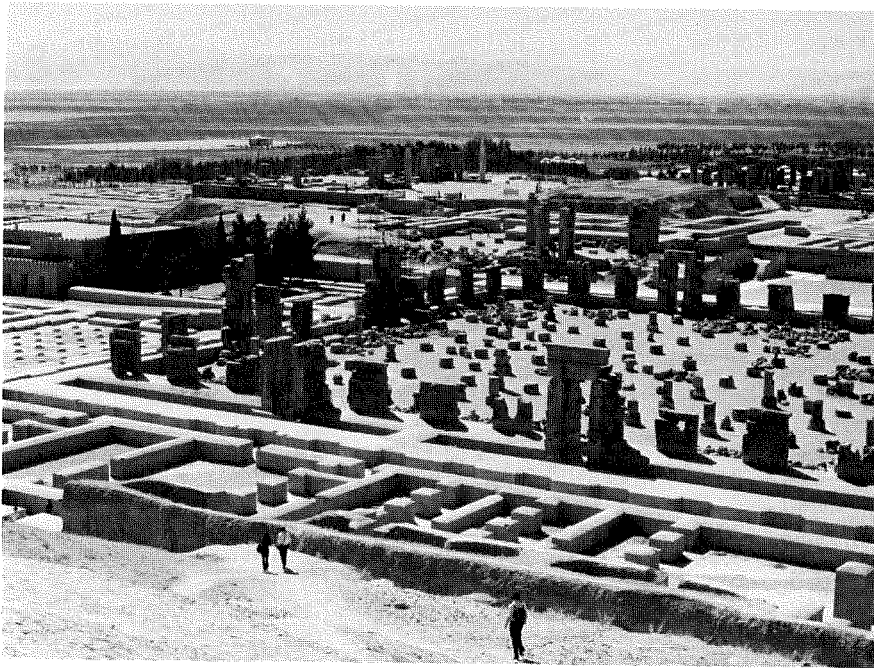


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3 Borobudur

4 Batten

5 Persepolis



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sky in the East as the sun goes down in the West, so you see the earth's shadow projected in the atmosphere. What you see underneath is night rising. Night doesn't fall. It rises.

Places: We want to ask about the relationship between people and their rituals and the activity that you anticipate people going through when they enter one of your pieces.

Turrell: It has to do with how you load a situation with information before entry to an experience. Here's an example that might be called a performance piece—this piece in which you take a plane out to Albuquerque or Phoenix and then go by car up to this one area in Canyon de Chelly, on the night of the year when the night-blooming cereus blooms. So we take you down there in a jeep and then you go by horseback or mule down the canyon at sunset. Finally, you come to this area where the cereus can be found, and you spend

several hours looking for one that hasn't quite begun to open. You go through this experience of watching this withers and is gone. Now, by the same token, there might be someone here in Boston who raises this plant in a wonderful hothouse. You go there, have a few drinks, stand around watching this happen, and it's over. The object is the same, yet, it's a totally different experience. And if you work with the limits of experience, you pay attention to how the experience is brought about and you don't worry as much about the object. In fact, that same experience might be had without the flower.

I feel that I work with a certain sense of physicality and materiality and I like it to come about from things that we don't think about as physical. I'm interested really in the experience and how it's experienced, so it's important to deal with those things that create the experience and not the object. One of the things that does happen and that

sometimes is encouraged by museums is hothouse art: art made for that. It's like the difference between, say, an orchid growing in Hawaii and then growing an orchid solely for the prom.

Places: The hothouse also implies an audience which appreciates these objects that are being grown.

Turrell: We're not apart from nature so the hothouse is not unnatural. Someone was talking to me about the difference between natural light and artificial light. Well, there isn't any difference because in light everything reveals what it is. When astronomers look at the stars, the stars reveal themselves in their light. When you do the flame test in chemistry to find out what something is made of, it releases a characteristic light of that material at that temperature. The same is true when we make a light-bulb. You heat tungsten and it gives off a particular light. If you heat xenon under high pressure it will give off a characteristic light and so there is no unnatural light—

there is only natural light. I'm interested in light wherever it comes from. I like gallery light. It is as reverent an object as, say, the sun or the moon. And it is something we've done.

Places: I think that this dialogue around the hothouse and the earth house, this larger house that we live in, around the gallery piece and the crater, around these places of power that you felt and have been so much a part of your own thinking and your own work, makes a wonderful set of connections.

Turrell: One thing about many of these places is that you must visit them, an idea not too dissimilar from the story of the night-blooming cereus.