

Framing the Space of Absence

David Anfam

“And the sublime comes down
To the spirit itself,

The spirit and space,
The empty spirit
In vacant space”

Wallace Stevens¹

“Structure is the giver of light”

Louis Kahn²

“I have to confess that I have great love
for civic space that is emptied of use”

James Turrell³

However 'spirituality' is defined, renunciation has been its perennial handmaiden. Across the ages, saints have retreated to their deserts, ascetics to their solitary cells and prophets to their proverbial wilderness. Pioneering modernist painters such as Kasimir Malevich, Piet Mondrian and Ad Reinhardt followed this path visually, reducing their art to the barest absolutes of geometry, space and light. The time-honoured means of oil paint on canvas sufficed for their stark ambitions. But in the 1970s James Turrell bucked the trend. He piloted a plane to scour the Arizona desert for a site from which to model a great arena to survey the cosmos and, meanwhile, utilised umpteen specialist devices—from theodolites and map-making stereoscopes to xenon projectors—to materialise his singular vision. Turrell's first Projection Works conceived in the late 1960s establish his paradoxical moves. They play with less and more. Less in terms of whatever is renounced—paint, canvas, drawing, movement, sound and matter. More in terms of the absolute materialisation of that most ubiquitous yet intangible of phenomena—light.

To appreciate the Projections, we must return to the moment and place of their inception. The time was autumn 1966; the location, the former Mendota Hotel in Ocean Park, Venice, a suburb of Los Angeles (fig. 1). Over a period of two years, Turrell transformed the building's interiors into a series of white boxes, soundproofed the ceilings, constructed walls in front of the existing windows to exclude external interference and then proceeded to sculpt illusory cubes and other geometric 'solids' by means of a Leitz slide projector focused in varying configurations on the studio's walls and corners (figs. 2, 3 & 4). This much is a matter of record.⁴ But consider, briefly, the larger context.

Outside sprawled one of the world's biggest urban regions. LA is of course the capital of a utopia in a state that—from Hollywood to Silicon Valley—has long given itself to illusion magicked by technology, whether it be the celluloid projections of the movies or the virtual reality of cyberspace.⁵ Inside, was a curious amalgam of California's scientific know-how with a monastic denial of its buzz and brash worldliness. After an early romance with mathematics, Turrell graduated with a degree in Perceptual Psychology from Pomona College in 1965; his penchant for sophisticated solutions was, for example, already hinted at in the mirror-coated glass of the slide templates, which required special fabrication and lent superior sharpness to the projected contours. Are we, then, in a latter-day variant of the cells of the monastery of San Marco in Florence where, on the wall depicting *The Annunciation*,⁶ Fra Angelico figured the epiphany of spirit as the luminous blankness between the angel Gabriel and the Virgin Mary? Or is this the high art analogue to some New Age altar, to a worship of emblems of enlightened consciousness? The answer is both and neither, because the Projections contain (like any artwork) something of their time, while also managing to transcend the time bound.⁷ Overall, their 'time' is

the duration that we, as beholders, contribute when puzzling the phenomenological elusiveness of these non-objects.

Implicit in the Projection Works is a concern that Turrell's later output would render explicit. This is the act of framing. By tailoring a light beam with his slide templates, Turrell crafted gestalts that are encompassed by the darkness and, in turn, the viewer's perceptual faculties. The latter entails a collaborative enterprise that—depending on distance, angle of vision and so forth—reads them either as two-dimensional planes or three-dimensional volumes.⁸ Subsequently, the Shallow Space Constructions, the Perceptual Cells and the Sky spaces interrogated 'framing' in diverse ways—from refulgence emanating from around the edges of a backlit partition, to a mini-environment surrounding the spectator, and the enclosure of celestial space by structural cuts into the roof of a room. *Roden Crater*—levelled at its crater bowl to form a 360 degree platform, a primal planetarium, itself filled with further loci through which ambient views are focused—is likely the greatest frame in the history of art. Frames connote a point of view.⁹ In a special sense, the studios of the Mendota Hotel were thus rooms with a view, albeit preter-natural interior ones. The dialectic between inside (a spectator's subjective perception or the leitmotif of enclosure) and outside (the actual sky or the illusory perspectives of the Wedgework Series and so forth) invokes similar reversals that came to the fore in the Romantic era

In such compositions as *View from the Artist's Atelier, Right Window* (fig. 5) Caspar David Friedrich was among the first to explore the interplay between consciousness and nature, self and reality.¹⁰ Here even the *Ruckenfigur* that inhabited many of Friedrich's landscapes disappears so that we, the beholders, are left to contemplate our own condition of spectatorship, gazing from the frames within—note the pictures on the wall—through the framing window to the vista outside.¹¹ Turrell recast the trajectory of this gaze when he declared, 'My works are not a looking at, but a looking into, not objects in a room, but the room.'¹² Friedrich's Romantic *mise-en-scene* was often replayed throughout the nineteenth century, but it was early in the last century that it took a radical turn. In Henri Matisse's astonishing *Porte-Fenetre a Collioure* (fig. 6) the domain outside the room becomes a total field of shadow (or, more accurately, the hue of cortical grey),¹³ defined at its borders by window-columns of pale, eggshell blue luminosity. Inside and outside are thus conflated. Matisse's lucent architectonics tacitly foretells the quiet intensity of Turrell's Projections.¹⁴ Given these various pictorial explorations of frameworks, it is telling that Turrell should have concluded that art was a 'frame of mind'.¹⁵

Two other precedents—in their formal strategies rather than for any direct influence—seem largely absent from the Turrell literature. The first is Giorgio de Chirico. To be sure, nothing looks further from the rational methods and serene

mood of Turrell's stage management than the weirdness of the Italian pre-Surrealist. Yet de Chirico's dramatisation of bright emptiness, cut by darkness into terse geometric planes of ambiguous perspectival depth (fig. 7), bears a strange affinity with the syntax of the Projection Works, especially as Turrell has referred repeatedly to oneiric modes of experience: 'I'm interested in the seeing that takes place inside. In a lucid dream, you have a sharper sense of color and lucidity than with your eyes open. I'm interested in the point where imaginative seeing and outside seeing meet...'.¹⁶ Common to Turrell and De Chirico is the seamless imposition of the metaphysical upon the commonplace.¹⁷

In the same period as De Chirico, though from a diametrically opposed standpoint, Kasimir Malevich came perhaps closer than any other early modernist to Turrell's synthesis of reductivism and transcendence. It is particularly significant that the Russian Suprematist's progress to the final ethereality embodied by such abstractions as *Suprematist Composition: White on White* (fig. 8) should have been influenced by the then-novel wonders of aviation. Malevich's route to the absolute was 'an art about flight, about man's ascent into the ether, into that mysterious light-carrying medium believed by occultists and many early scientists to fill all empty space'.¹⁸ Likewise, Turrell—who earned a living as an aerial cartographer—speaks of the transfiguring influence of flying an aircraft: The spaces encountered in flight, and the work of the Sky spaces, brought about the desired work with larger amounts of space and a more curvilinear sense of the sky and its, limits.¹⁹ As Malevich's diaphanous rectangles tilt and fade into some fourth dimension, so too do the sheerest planes of the Projections, such as *Pullen, (White)* (fig. 9) and *Porter Powell, (White)* (fig. 10), which seem to inhabit some transient flatland between being and nothingness. Indeed, a statement of Malevich's might well apply to them: 'The Suprematist infinite white allow the beam to pass on without encountering any limit'.²⁰ The metaphorical 'desert' of Malevich's mind wherein he ultimately found his own 'transfiguration' has its literal counterpart in Turrell's discovery of the Arizona desert around Roden Crater: an ideal site for the projection of human consciousness into the outer reaches of the landscape below and the sidereal spectacle above.²¹

The fascination of Turrell's achievement is that it straddles the local and the universal. On the one hand, the Projections retain a faint but distinct whiff of their Californian milieu. Obviously, it is the California that produced Robert Irwin, Ron Davis, Larry Bell and other members of the Light and Space group which constituted Turrell's matrix. The critic Rosalind Krauss named this trend the 'California Sublime'.²² Krauss's label was apposite. As Manhattan feels eons away from LA, so the industrial-duty steel, copper, rubber, bricks and other macho materials of the New York Minimalists was at a remove from Irwin's glass, Bell's polyester resin and Turrell's light.²³ Factory floor, as it were, versus hi-tech lab. More subtly, Turrell's practice commandeers that idiosyncratic radiance of the Southern Californian

atmosphere—pure, airy, Mediterranean and geometrically clipped—that is found elsewhere in, say, David Hockney's early LA paintings and throughout Ed Ruscha's.

In fact, perhaps the most impressive contemporary deployment of vacant space structured by light lies only a couple of hours' drive along the coast from Ocean Park. It is Louis Kahn's starkly geometric framing of the Pacific sea and sky by the architectural masses of the Salk Institute (1965) in La Jolla (fig. 11). To describe the creative instinct, Kahn often used a bilateral diagram, in which the words 'Silence and Light' were written on either side of a central axial line²⁴—this could be a blueprint for the Projection Pieces. Speaking of California locales, the Projections were not the only artworks to spring from Ocean Park. By an odd coincidence, Richard Diebenkorn also painted his lengthy series of eponymous abstractions here. (fig. 12). The symmetry would be less vivid if, in the Ocean Park works, Diebenkorn's palette of sky blue, gold, pink and so on—allied to the crisp rectangles and parallelograms—were not so kin to the spectrum of the Projections. Although there is no question of reciprocal influence, both series meditate on optical openness and definition, mood and transparency.²⁵

A critic has remarked that Diebenkorn's *Ocean Park* series is possibly haunted by the erasure of human presences²⁶; a sense of absence remains a hypnotic feature of Turrell's Projections. By definition, framing implies exclusion; hence absence becomes one of their subjects.²⁷ Like fingering after-images, they evoke the simulacra left by some more tangible force that has vanished. In opposition to this transparent ghostliness,²⁸ light is the age-old sign of presence, the *fiat lux* that summons matter into being. There is a touch of such a clarion call to the decisive intrusions that the Projections make into their dark vacuums. In contrast to Turrell's Californian side, these intimations add a universal dimension that links him to Abstract Expressionism and thence to even older American traditions.

Although Turrell admired Mark Rothko's paintings when they were projected as slides, he was disappointed by the actual originals, which somehow lacked the same all-pervasive refulgence.²⁹ However, no record exists of his response to Barnett Newman's canvases (fig. 13). The omission is thought-provoking insofar as Newman's signature style—less brushy and more hard-edged than Rothko's—may be the nearest approach in painting to Turrell's aesthetic. From the time of *Onement I* (1948), Newman was avowedly concerned with the same core substance as Turrell: light. When the older artist toured the Louvre in 1968 and remarked of a painting there that 'the color is pure light,' he clearly expressed the aim underlying his own chromatic fields.³⁰ Alongside the message of Newman's titles—*Profile of Light*, *Horizon Light* (1949), *Primordial Light* (1954), *Who's Afraid of Red, Yellow and Blue* (1966-70) and so on—it is also the concern with experiential 'fullness' that unites the two artists. On entering certain cathedrals, Turrell has been overwhelmed by the

'fullness or oneness of the universe', in a similar vein, Newman realized that in *Onement I*, 'I had filled the surface. It was full...'³¹ Moreover, the shaping of voids into felt volume that is implicit in the Projections was the first step in a progress that culminated in the celestial vaulting—the impression that the sky has a definable curvature—engendered by *Roden Crater*.³² Compare this goal with Newman's: 'Since childhood I have always been aware of space as a space-dome... For me, space is where I can feel all four horizons.'³³

But impulses with a still older ancestry lurk in Turrell's universe. They are vividly foretold in Edward Hopper's iconography. In Hopper's *Sun in an Empty Room* (fig. 14) we seem to witness an American sensibility that walks a precarious balance between inner consciousness and external fact.³⁴ The reduction of everything to sunlight casting its geometries into nothingness carries both the poignancy and the precision that are at the crux of the Projections. There is also a certain kind of Yankee-cum-Puritan austerity here that Turrell will make his own.³⁵ Its frankest articulation comes in the poetry of Wallace Stevens. Stevens's balancing act is conducted on the cusp between philosophical idealism (the faith that all depends on the vast horizons of the creative imagination) and workaday pragmatism—the countervailing realization that all aspirations devolve, in the words of one unforgettable poem, to 'a plain sense of things':

And the sublime comes down
To the spirit itself,

The spirit and space,
The empty spirit
In vacant space³⁶

Stevens's metaphysic in turn rests upon an earlier thinker, Ralph Waldo Emerson. Repeatedly Emerson sought to bridge—as Turrell has—the threshold between subjective apperception and objective reality. Listen to Emerson in the essay 'Nature', a veritable commentary *avant la lettre* on the Projections:

The eye is the best of artists. By the mutual action of its structure and of the laws of light, perspective is produced.... And as the eye is the best composer, so light is the first of painters.³⁷

Yet further back than Emerson stood a campaign to invest emptiness with the activating spirit of light. It transpired, appropriately, with the architecture of the Enlightenment.³⁸ In the ideal spaces imagined by Etienne-Louis Boullée and his contemporaries, light and darkness were intended to evoke vast, numinous 'spaces of absence'.³⁹ There, august geometric shapes suggested both the perspectives of

eternity and, as a recent architectural historian observes, 'a mysterious solemnity that takes us out of this world into a type of limbo....'⁴⁰ Turrell's Projections—diaphanous though definite—hover between this dream-like consciousness and the Platonic assertion of a timeless order:

And he attains to the purest knowledge... who goes to each with the mind alone, not introducing or intruding in the act of thought sight or any other sense together with reason, but with the very light of the mind in her own clearness searches into the very truth of each.⁴¹

Illustrations



Fig. 1



Fig. 2



Fig. 3

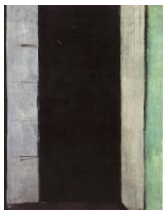


Fig. 4

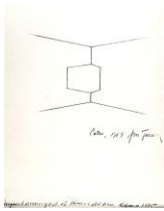


Fig. 5

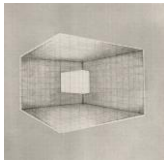


Fig. 6

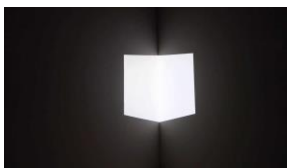


Fig. 7

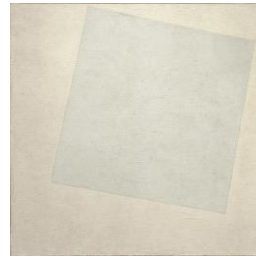


Fig. 8



Fig. 9



Fig. 10



Fig. 11



Fig. 12



Fig. 13



Fig. 14

Fig. 1
Mendota Hotel, Ocean Park, California, c. 1970-72, exterior

Fig. 2
James Turrell, *Catso*, 1967.
Graphite on paper. Pasadena Art Museum, USA

Fig. 3
James Turrell, *Catso*, 1967
Drawing/Plan in ink and pencil, 43.1 x 49.5 cm

Fig. 4
James Turrell, *Afrum Proto*, 1966.
Projection work as installed inside the second studio space of the Mendola Hotel, c. 1970
Private Collection

Fig. 5
Caspar David Friedrich, *View from the Artist's Atelier Right Window*, 1805-6
Sepia on paper, 31.2 x 23.7 cm. Oesterreichische Galerie Belvedere, Vienna

Fig. 6
Henri Matisse, *Porte-Fenêtre à Collioure*, 1914
Oil on canvas, 116.5 x 89 cm. Musée National d' Art Moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris

Fig. 7
Giorgio de Chirico. *The Enigma of a Day* (El enigma de un día), 1914
Oil on canvas, 185.5 x 139.7 cm. The Museum of Modern Art, NYC

Fig. 8
Kazimir Malévich, *Suprematist Composition: White on White*, 1918
Oil on canvas, 79.4 x 79.4 cm. The Museum of Modern Art, NYC

Fig. 9
James Turrell, *Pullen, (White)*, 1967
Projection work. Private Collection

Fig. 10
James Turrell, *Porter Powell, (White)*, 1967
Projection work. Private Collection As in stalled at Michael Hue-Williams 15 Cork Street, London, 1996

Fig. 11
Louis Kahn, Salk Institute, La Jolla, LA, 1965

Fig. 12
Richard Diebenkorn, *Ocean Park Series No. 49*, 1972
Oil on canvas, 236.22 x 205.74 cm. Los Angeles County Museum of Art
Purchased with funds provided by Paul Rosenberg and company, Mrs Lita Hazen and David E. Bright Bequest

Fig. 13
Barnett Newman, *Profile of Light*, 1967
Oil on canvas, 304,8 x 190.5 cm
Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia, Madrid

Fig. 14
Edward Hopper, *Sun in an Empty Room*, 1963
Oil on canvas, 73.7 x 101.6 cm. Private Collection

- ¹ Wallace Stevens, "The American Sublime" (1928) in *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1954, 1999), p. 131.
- ² Louis Kahn, quoted in Nell E. Johnson, *Light is the Theme: Louis I. Kahn and the Kimbell Art Museum* (Fort Worth: Kimbell Art Foundation, 1975), p. 21.
- ³ James Turrell, "Interview with Esa Laaksonen," Blacksburg, Va., 1996.
- ⁴ For a full account, see Craig Adcock, *James Turrell: The Art of Light and Space* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), pp. 7-35.
- ⁵ The analogy between the Projections and the cinema is not altogether misplaced. As early advertisements for the cinema confirm, the foundational magnetism of the medium rests upon a shaft of light projected in darkness at a distant screen, whereon two dimensions become three. See David Trotter, "All of a Tremble" [book review of Hans Zischler, *Kafka Goes to the Movies*] *London Review of Books*, 4 March 2004, p. 27.
- ⁶ The minimalist version in Cell 3 (c.1441-43), rather than that in the Upper Corridor (1450).
- ⁷ In a literal sense, Turrell's methods and prescriptions allow the Projections to be recreated anywhere, anytime.
- ⁸ But never both simultaneously, since it is an axiom of the psychology of perception that we can only perceive ambiguity in one way at a time. See the discussion of the two-cum-three dimensional Arnes Chair in E. H. Gombrich, "Ambiguities of the Third Dimension," in *Art and Illusion: A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation* (London: Phaidon Press, 1960), pp. 209-11.
- ⁹ On the metaphysics of framing, see Jacques Derrida, "Parergon," in *The Truth in Painting* trans. Geoff Bennington and Ian McLeod (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), pp. 15-147.
- ¹⁰ If the Mendota Hotel, *Roden Crater* and their like were not so southerly, Turrell might be deemed one of the foremost latter-day exponents of the "northern Romantic tradition". For such a reading, see Robert Rosenblum, "Rothko's Sublimities," in *On the Sublime: Mark Rothko, Yves Klein, James Turrell* (Berlin: Deutsche Guggenheim, 2001), pp. 43-59.
- ¹¹ For a nuanced interpretation of Friedrich's framing iconography, see Joseph Leo Koerner, *Caspar David Friedrich and the Subject of Landscape* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1990), passim.
- ¹² Turrell, quoted in Adcock, op. cit., p. 36.
- ¹³ That Matisse chose such a colour—the foggy tone that we see when our eyes are closed—emphasises the psychological dimension of this 'landscape' view bereft of landscape.
- ¹⁴ I also discern a doubtless unintentional (or at least submerged) link between Turrell's works and Colour-Field painting, especially Morris Louis's Unfurleds and Jules Olitski's canvases from c.1967 onwards. Both were deeply involved with creating spatial illusion (by framing voids), disembodied radiance and modular designs that provided templates within which colour variations could be endlessly implemented.
- ¹⁵ Turrell, quoted by Jane Livingston, "Robert Irwin/James Turrell," in Maurice Tuchman, ed., *Art & Technology: A Report on the Art & Technology Program of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art* (Los Angeles and New York: Los Angeles County Museum of Art and Viking Press, 1971), p. 131.
- ¹⁶ Turrell, in Peter Noever, ed., *James Turrell: the other horizon* (Vienna and Ostfildern-Ruit: MAK and Hatje Cantz, 1998), p. 130.
- ¹⁷ Given Turrell's use of corner angles, compare Bachelard's notion that they are a locus for dreams. Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space* trans. Maria Jolas (Boston: Beacon Press, 1958, 1994), pp. 144-45.
- ¹⁸ John Golding, *Paths to the Absolute* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2000), p. 67.
- ¹⁹ Turrell, in Noever, op. cit., p. 158.
- ²⁰ Malevich, quoted in Golding, op. cit., p. 74.
- ²¹ Malevich (to the critic Alexandre Benois), quoted in Gilles Neret, *Kazimir Malevich 1878-1935* (Cologne: Taschen, 2003), p. 49.
- ²² Rosalind Krauss, "Overcoming the Limits of Matter: On Revising Minimalism," in *Studies in Modern Art* no. 1 (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1991), p. 133.
- ²³ Howard N. Fox, "Tremors in Paradise, 1960-1980," in *Made III California: Art, Image, and Identity, 1900-2000*. (Berkeley and Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art and University of California Press, 2000), pp. 208-10.
- ²⁴ James Steele, *Salk Institute. Louis I. Kahn* (London: Phaidon Press, 2002), n. p.
- ²⁵ Diebenkorn, like Turrell, was influenced by aerial views. Revealingly, Diebenkorn's encounter with Matisse's *Porte-Fentre à Collioure* marked a turning point in his development. See Jane Livingston, the *Art of Richard Diebenkorn* (New York and Berkeley: Whitney Museum of American Art and University of California Press, 1997), pp. 38, 62. The glowing orange oblong plane of Diebenkorn's *Window* (1967; Livingston, p. 63) is a dead ringer for *Prado Red* and, given the dates, proof that correspondences are coincidental.
- ²⁶ Arthur Danto (1988), quoted in Livingston, op. cit., p. 112.
- ²⁷ Cf. Trotter, op. cit., p. 27: 'In the cinema, unlike the theatre, performer and audience never coincide; for the one party to be present, the other must be absent.'
- ²⁸ On the uncanny quality of transparency, see Anthony Vidler, *The Architectural Uncanny: Essays in the Modern Unhomely* (Cambridge, Mass. MIT Press, 1996), pp. 217-25. David Katz, *The World of Colour* (London: Kegan, Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co., 1935) still offers the best insights into the variations from 'surface' to 'film' and 'volume' colours that Turrell engineers.
- ²⁹ Adcock, op. cit., n. 26, p. 203.
- ³⁰ Newman, quoted in John P. O'Neill, ed. *Barnett Newman: Selected Writings and Interviews* (New York: Alfred A Knopf, 1990), p. 292.
- ³¹ Ibid., p. 306. Also, p. 249: 'The fullness thereof is what I am involved in' In both Newman and Turrell, such 'fullness' ultimately relates to the Biblical concept of *pleroma*, itself equated with the sensation of time. Turrell observed of *Roden Crater*: 'It is a site where you feel geologic time.' (*Air Mass: James Turrell* [London: The South Bank Centre, 1993], p. 58). And, of course, among Newman's paintings is *Cathedra* (1951) which references the throne—that is, the locus of numinous presence—of the deity (as does a cathedral).
- ³² Similarly, the curvature of the earth had long before been suggested by Friedrich in *Large Enclosure* (c.1832).
- ³³ Newman, quoted in O'Neill, op. cit., p. 249.
- ³⁴ The metaphor of light playing inside a room is an ancient metaphor for thoughts in a human head See John Hollander, "Hopper and the Figure of Room," *Art Journal* 41 (summer 1981), p. 159.
- ³⁵ It is a commonplace of the literature that Turrell's parents were Quakers.
- ³⁶ The preoccupation with emptiness—see Turrell's statement in the epigraph to this essay—relates his sensibility to another contemporary, Charles Simonds, whose miniature pueblos were paradigms of abandoned space. See David Anfam, "Simonds's Domain: Fragments and Secrets of Time," in *Charles Simonds* (Valencia: IVAM, 2003), pp. 50-75.
- ³⁷ Emerson, "Nature" (1836), in Carl Bode, ed. *The Portable Emerson* (New York: Penguin Books, 1981), p. 13.
- ³⁸ The very term 'Enlightenment' plays on the influx of a higher consciousness—embodied by light—to the brute condition of matter.
- ³⁹ The phrase is from Richard A. Ettl, *Symbolic Space: French Enlightenment Architecture and Its Legacy* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1994), p. 172. Also, John Soane's mausoleum for Francis Bourgeois in Dulwich Picture Gallery (1817) fills a bay with amber light from a mysteriously hidden source.
- ⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 172 Ettl continues with remarks relevant to Turrell: 'They sometimes use a special light, luminous and crystalline or somber and ghostly.'
- ⁴¹ Plato, *Phaedo*, trans. Benjamin Jowett, in Scott Buchanan, ed., *The Portable Plato* (New York: Penguin Books, 1977), p. 203 See also, Arthur Zajonc, *Catching the Light: The Entwined History of Light and Mind* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993). In 1980 Turrell created the Phaedo series.

Projection Pieces 1966-69

James Turrell

The earliest projection works began in 1966 and were formed by light projected across a corner from a slightly modified quartz halogen projector. The first image (*Afrum-Proto*, 1966) was essentially a rectangle projected across a corner in such a way that from a distance there appeared to be a cube floating off the floor, yet in some manner attached to the corner of the space. From a distance this shape had solidity, but appeared to be literally composed of light. Still, at a distance, but moving to the side, one could further substantiate this impression because the cube seemed to reveal itself in perspective. Advancing toward it, the image would eventually dissolve to the point where you saw not the object in space, but the actual light on the wall.

The first images had a distinctive sculptural quality: the piece seemed to objectify and make physically present light as a tangible material. The space which these pieces occupied was definitely not the same as that which the room had without the image. The space generated was analogous to a painting in two dimensions alluding to three dimensions, but in this case three-dimensional space was being used illusionistically. That is, the forms engendered through this quality of illusion did not necessarily resolve into one clearly definable form that would exist in three dimensions.

A series of similar cross-corner forms was then created, using xenon projectors constructed with the help of Leonard Pincus. Use of the xenon projectors allowed the size of the projections to be increased without any loss of brilliance. At the same time, crispness of focus was gained because the xenon source is a point source. Throughout the series, the image had a sense of solidity because, in some manner, a quality of transparency and surface had been created. This was unavoidable since the image was formed across a corner actually existing in three dimensions, and because any evenly lit shape of light projected on the wall cannot ride on exactly the same plane as the wall.

***First Light* (1989-90) and *Still Light* (1990-91)**

James Turrell

In 1989-90, the *First Light* series of aquatint prints were produced. This was my third use of the intaglio process, following earlier suites, *Deep Sky* from 1984 and *Mapping Spaces* from 1987. *First Light* has as its subject the first body of light works, the Projection Pieces, begun in 1967. Each title within the series refers to a unique projection possibility, although only a few of these light spaces were actually realised. *First Light* reproduces the bright form of light as it contacts the wall plane. The next series *Still Light* from 1990-91, continues this examination of the effect of the light projections by revealing the quality of light released into the space of the room. In contrast to the sharp definition of the *First Light* series, the *Still Light* prints evoke the misty atmospheric effect of the projection. With the help of printer Peter Kneub Ohler, the aquatint technique was used as the purest, most light-catching form of etching, one which could dispense with line, and instead allow for the subtle all-over tonal effects present in the light works.

James Turrell was born in Los Angeles in 1943. He graduated from Pomona College, Claremont, California in 1965 after studying Psychology, Mathematics and Art History. After completing his studies in Fine Arts from the University of California between 1965-66 he was given his first one-man show in 1967 at the Pasadena Art Museum. The following year he was invited to take part in the Los Angeles County Museum's Art and Technology Program where he worked with the artist Robert Irwin and the perceptual psychologist Edward Wortz. The same year he was awarded a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts. By 1972 Turrell had completed his Projection Series and had begun working on his Shallow Space Constructions in addition to creating the Mendota Stoppages, out of which he developed the first prototypes for his Wedgework Series. In 1973 he graduates with an MA Fine Arts, from Claremont Graduate School. By 1974 Turrell gives up the Mendota Studio at Ocean Park in California bringing to a close one of his most formative periods of experimentation. The same year he is awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship, which he uses to begin his search by aeroplane for a suitable site from which to develop his experiments with light and space. After a period of 7 months he finds the *Roden Crater* in the Painted Desert of Arizona, which he later purchases with the support of the Dia Art Foundation in 1977. Following his first international solo exhibition aged 33 at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam Turrell moves to Flagstaff, Arizona in 1979 to begin his *magnus opus* the *Roden Crater*, transforming the extinct volcano into a unique celestial observatory using only the inter-dependence of inner and outer light and space. With phase one of the *Roden Crater* now complete, Turrell has continued to exhibit internationally over the course of the last 27 years—Whitney Museum of American Art (1980), ARC, Musee d'Art Moderne, Paris (1983), The Mattress Factory, Pennsylvania (1983), Israel Museum, Jerusalem (1983), Museum of Contemporary Art, LA, (1985), Lannan Museum, Lakeworth, Florida (1988), Museum of Modern Art, NYC (1990), Henry Art Gallery, Seattle (1992), Henry Moore Sculpture Trust, Halifax, UK (1993), Hayward Gallery, UK (1993), Art Tower Mita, Japan (1995), Kunsthhaus Bregenz, Austria (1997), Naoshima Contemporary Art Museum (1998), Nagoya City Museum, Nagoya, Japan (1998), MAK, Vienna (1998), Scottsdale Museum of Contemporary Art (2001), Haus Konstruktiv, Zurich (2002), Henry Art Gallery, Seattle (2003) and IVAM, Valencia (2004).

In 1984 Turrell was one of the first of two visual artists to be awarded the prestige 'genius' award—the Katherine T. and John D. MacArthur Foundation Fellowship—for his work with Robert Irwin as part of the Art and Technology Program. He was also awarded the Chevalier des Arts et des Lettres, France in 1991 and the Friedrich Prize, Germany in 1992. In 2003 he was awarded an Honorary Doctorate by the Royal College of Art, London and honoured with membership of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences in 2004.