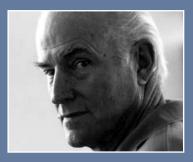


An Educator's Guide to The 19th Annual Chicago Humanities Festival OCTOBER 3 - NOVEMBER 16, 2008



2008 Richard Gray Lecturer on Visual Artist: Robert Irwin

Robert Irwin, Artist



Robert Irwin has been a dominant figure in American Art for more than 46 years as both a practitioner and a teacher. Irwin graduated from Otis Art Institute, Jepsons Art Institute and Chouinards Art Institute (1948-1954). He has

taught at Chouinards (1957-58), University of California, Los Angeles (1962), and in 1968-69, he developed the graduate program at the University of California, Irvine, working with a number of now successful artists. Irwin has received the John Simon Guggenheim Fellowship, several honorary doctorates, a National Endowment for the Arts Grant, and the first artist to receive the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Fellowship.

In the early part of his art career, about 1958-1968 Irwin practiced as a painter. Today these paintings are in the permanent collections of The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles; the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; the Museum of Modern Art, New York; the Philadelphia Museum of Art, The Art Institute of Chicago; and the Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris.

Irwin's art grew out of Abstract Expressionism but his drive to push boundaries of art and perception found him outside of the studio around 1970 and instead pursuing installation art that dealt directly with light and space. A leading creator of the art of light and space, the basis of visual perception, he transformed both indoor and outdoor spaces altering and heightening the viewers' perception of the space.

wikipedia.org. Wikipedia Foundation, Inc.

pacewildenstein.com. Pace Wildenstein

pacewinderistein.com. Pace winderistein.
24 April. 2008 < http://www.pacewildenstein.com/Artists/ViewArtist.aspx?artist=RobertIrwin&type=Artist&guid=f924c6fa-a6c4-486e-979d-b3bdd1bbdae6>.

Getting to the Core: Excerpt

An artist, for example, can create an overriding order, while also taking visual and experiential complexities as opportunities for discoveries in perception.

- Robert Irwin

The primary medium of Irwin's art is neither steel nor glass, neither trees nor pavement, but our perception, our curiosity, and our desire to make sense of the world around us. By subtly manipulating our environment in unexpected ways, his gestures provoke us to see differently, to question our assumptions, and to pay an attention to phenomena that in turn cause us to redraw our mental picture of the world. The role of the artist, in Irwin's terms, is to learn to see not only a physical, quantitative reality but the qualitative aspects of a situation, and to empower the viewer to gain access to that vision as well—to engage in a process of discovery. The real subject of Irwin's art is not the object, then, but the viewer:

REFLECTION: Poem

Crossings

By Ravi Shankar

Between forest and field, a threshold like stepping from a cathedral into the street—the quality of air alters, an eclipse lifts,

boundlessness opens, earth itself retextured into weeds where woods once were.

Even planes of motion shift from vertical

navigation to horizontal quiescence: there's a standing invitation to lie back as sky's unpredictable theater proceeds.

Suspended in this ephemeral moment after leaving a forest, before entering a field, the nature of reality is revealed.

poets.org. 1997-2008. The Academy of American Poets. 24 April. 2008 http://www.poets.org/viewmedia.php/prmMID/16831

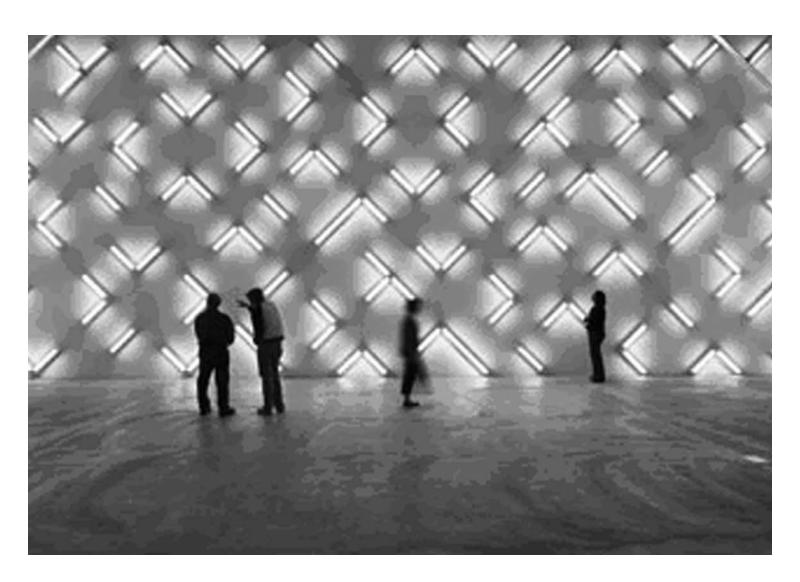
As artists, the one true inquiry of art as a pure subject is an inquiry of our potential to know the world around us and our actively being in it, with a particular emphasis on the aesthetic. This world is not just somehow given to us whole. We perceive, we shape the world, and as artists we discover and give value to our human potential to "see" the infinite richness (beauty?) in everything, creating an extended aesthetic reality.

Through a self-directed study of philosophy, psychology, and art history, Irwin has come to understand art not within its traditional social, cultural, and commercial practice of object making but as a process of "pure inquiry," as he says, and "pure subject." Art for him need not result in a discrete object or even a discrete experience. The work of the artist might then be defined as a process of investigation subject to a particular set of circumstances (a place,

an invitation to work, a problem to solve) that may or may not result in a thing called artwork.

"If you asked me the sum total—what is your ambition?" Irwin told his friend and biographer Lawrence Weschler. "Basically it's just to make you a little more aware than you were the day before of how beautiful the world is. It's not saying that I know what the world should look like. It's not that I'm rebuilding the world. Basically what artists do is to teach you how to exercise your own potential—they always have, that's the one thread that goes all the way through." By Irwin's measure, a work of art succeeds when it challenges our perceptions to such a degree as to cause us to reconsider our environment and invest it, and ourselves, with greater potential.

Govan, Michael. "Robert Irwin." Dia Art Foundation. 1995-2008. 24 April. 2008. < http://www.diaart.org/exhibs_b/irwin/essay.html.



As noted in his biography, artist Robert Irwin is "a leading creator of the art of light and space, the basis of visual perception." Of his goals as an artist, Irwin says, "Basically, it's just to make you a little more aware than you were the day before of how beautiful the world is."

Lesson Plan: Liberal Art: Considering Beauty of Place

Essential Question: How can a work of art make us stop and think, challenge our perceptions of the world, and reveal beauty?

Goals

This lesson is most suitable for Art classes, though it could be relevant in English/Language Arts and Humanities classrooms as well. In addition to web research, it addresses the skills of seeing, describing, and analyzing works of art and then conceptualizing, constructing, and documenting one's own work of art.

Objectives

After examining and discussing Robert Irwin's work, students will conceive and execute a work of art that "manipulates the context of the environment" in a way that "heightens the viewers' perception of the space." Students will focus their creative attention on the school environment since the interior and exterior spaces of school buildings are generally taken for granted by the people who see them every day.

Materials & Resources

The following web sites provide an overview of Robert Irwin's work, particularly his subtle manipulation of interior and exterior environments.

- "Two Running Violet V Forms" (1983), Stuart Collection at the University of California, San Diego, CA: http://stuartcollection.ucsd.edu/StuartCollection/ Irwin.htm
- List of Irwin Exhibitions, PaceWildenstein Gallery, NY, NY: http://www.pacewildenstein.com/Artists/ Default.aspx
- "Untitled" (1981), Allen Memorial Art Museum, Oberlin College, OH: http://www.oberlin.edu/ amam/Irwin_Untitled.htm
- Irwin Collection Pieces, Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, MN: http://collections.walkerart.org/item/agent/125
- Irwin Collection Pieces, Dia:Beacon, Riggio Galleries, NY, NY: http://www.diabeacon.org/exhibs/irwin/excursus/
- Public Art as Science Project, ArtsJournal blog, June 2008: http://www.artsjournal.com/aesthetic-grounds/

Timeframe

This activity will take three to five days to complete.

Process and Procedure

- 1. On Day 1, students should examine images of, and commentary about, Robert Irwin's work. (Unless this is a more advanced art class, the teacher should define and address the concepts of "contemporary" art and the "installation" genre.) Students should select a piece of Irwin's to which they are particularly drawn, describe it either in writing or by drawing, and then share their observations with the class.
- 2. The teacher will lead students in a discussion of how Irwin manipulates the environment in a way that "heightens the viewers' perception of the space." Make a list of techniques on the board.
- 3. On the second day, groups of up to four students will begin to conceive an Irwinesque installation project of their own, preferably one that can be installed somewhere in the school environment. (It would be really nice to do this one outside!) Students will keep an "Installation Planning Notebook" for their brainstorming and design ideas, as well as the questions that come up during the process.
- 4. Students will gather materials to use in their project. (The teacher should encourage the students to use recyclable materials to minimize the installation's environmental impact.)
- 5. Once the necessary permissions have been received from the school administration, students will construct their installations.
- 6. A possible addition to this project: Have each group write a one page summary explaining the relationship of their installation piece with its surroundings. The essays could be displayed somewhere near each installation and/or read in class.
- 7. Students will invite the rest of the school to view their work, and they will record their visitors' reactions to the work, either by interviewing them or providing an on-site notebook for feedback.
- 8. Students will share their experiences, as well as visitor feedback, in a final, debriefing class period.
- 9. After documenting their work photographically, students will dismantle (and recycle) their installation.

Assessment

Observation notes on, or drawing of, one of Irwin's works; "Installation Planning Notebook"; photographic documentation of the process of assembling the installation; viewer feedback notebook.

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