The exhibition Phenomenal: California Light, Space, Surface is on view in La Jolla and San Diego, California, from September 25, 2011 to January 22, 2012.

Phenomenal: California Light, Space, Surface is organized by the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego and has been made possible thanks to a major grant from the Getty Foundation. The project has also received generous grants from the Henry Luce Foundation for American Art and the Farrel Family Foundation. Additional support for the project comes from Faye Hunter Russell, Brent Woods and Laurie Mitchell, and the National Endowment for the Arts, a federal agency. Institutional support for MCASD is provided, in part, by the City of San Diego Commission for Arts and Culture.

Phenomenal is a part of Pacific Standard Time: Art in L.A. 1945–1980. This unprecedented collaboration, initiated by the Getty, brings together more than sixty cultural institutions from across Southern California for six months beginning October 2011 to tell the story of the birth of the Los Angeles art scene and how it became a major new force in the art world.

Pacific Standard Time is an initiative of the Getty. The presenting sponsor is Bank of America.

University of California Press, one of the most distinguished university presses in the United States, enriches lives around the world by advancing scholarship in the humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences. Its activities are supported by the UC Press Foundation and by philanthropic contributions from individuals and institutions. For more information, visit www.ucpress.edu.

Every effort has been made to identify the rightful copyright holders of material not specifically commissioned for use in this publication and to secure permission, where applicable, for reuse of all such material. Credit, if and as available, has been provided for all borrowed material either on-page, on the copyright page, or in an acknowledgment section of the book. Errors or omissions in credit citations or failure to obtain permission if required by copyright law have been either unavoidable or unintentional. The authors and publisher welcome any information that would allow them to correct future reprints.

University of California Press
Berkeley and Los Angeles, California

University of California Press, Ltd.
London, England

© 2011 by The Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego


Library of Congress Control Number: 2011935611

Manufactured in U.S.A.

The paper used in this publication meets the minimum requirements of ANSI/NISO z39.48-1992 (R 1997) Permanence of Paper.
It is hard to keep clear how words work as you hold forth on strange art. Metaphor, analogy, and other abstract conceits tend to treat a piece under examination as already well enough understood that it can be tellingly likened to something else, another artwork perhaps or a theoretical concept, that is itself regarded as well enough understood to anchor the suggested correlation. Such a structure presupposes considerable knowledge of both entities to be compared and, for that reason, seems unpromising if you are just beginning to learn about either of them. Other approaches also have problems. A more direct report of the similarities and differences between two paintings, two sculptures, or two phenomena rests upon the premise of their essential commensurability, a sometimes tenuous assumption that this and that share enough for their comparison to yield some insight. And even straight description of a single piece, art journalism at its most precise and prosaic, emphasizes certain material and visual properties and not others, thereby conjuring resonances, evoking, alluding. The risk here is that in experiencing art through language, we may allow words and their logic to supplant the work and its...
Work and Words
Adrian Kohn

It is hard to keep clear how words work as you hold forth on strange art. Metaphor, analogy, and other abstract conceits tend to treat a piece under examination as already well enough understood that it can be tellingly likened to something else, another artwork perhaps or a theoretical concept, that is itself regarded as well enough understood to anchor the suggested correlation. Such a structure presupposes considerable knowledge of both entities to be compared and, for that reason, seems unpromising if you are just beginning to learn about either of them. Other approaches also have problems. A more direct report of the similarities and differences between two paintings, two sculptures, or two phenomena rests upon the premise of their essential commensurability, a sometimes tenuous assumption that this and that share enough for their comparison to yield some insight. And even straightforward description of a single piece, art journalism at its most precise and prosaic, emphasizes certain material and visual properties and not others, thereby conjuring resonances, evoking, alluding. The risk here is that in experiencing art through language, we may allow words and their logic to supplant the work and its.

Larry Bell and Robert Irwin, like other artists in this exhibition and many other artists beyond it, have written about writing on art. Yes, we invariably lose visual information and inherit vernacular connotations in going from work to words—that much is obvious. But time and again Bell and Irwin reiterate the point. So often, in fact, that one starts to think it through with greater care. The assertion that follows may come across as both simpleminded and pigheaded, but the rediscovery seems key: sensations are nonverbal. The perceptual input that makes up the reality we respond to each day just does not feel like language at root. After all, English lacks good adjectives and nouns for what occurs on the wall behind an Irwin disc. Something like illuminated shadows, maybe. And the right prepositions and verbs are tough to pick out when saying what Bell's glass does. As you look at or into or through a panel, it both reflects and transmits light and obscures the distinction implied there. Such phenomena strain the language, and the resulting verbal muddle offers the chance to see, for a change, without reading or reading into.

LEARNING ESOTERICA

Making an art object provides new knowledge about the piece itself, of course, but also to some extent about the world in which it exists—about, attested Larry Bell, "light, physics, matter in general."1 "As I look back on the early pieces," he wrote years later, "the thing that is most dramatic about them to me is how much I learned from them, how much I learned on my own about things that I never before even considered relevant."2 That realization prompted another in turn, a broader claim on behalf of both his own creations and creative activity at large. "Art is the manifestation of learning," pronounced the artist. "We can perform in any way we see fit, as long as our work teaches us something every day."3

That formulation undercuts how most of us engage art, however. Critics and historians in particular may affect a studied assurance in likening unaccustomed pieces and phenomena to what they have seen before and already learned. Or this move may prove unwitting: prior experience can mask to others and to oneself a natural and blameless ignorance amid what is, in truth, a very different encounter. For once why not seek out the oddity of art? View an image, a thing, an act, a space in itself. Try to make discoveries instead of reconfirming what you know. Again, Bell insisted, art will inform if you let it: "The importance of the work is in whether it teaches you something, and leads to the next step," that is to say, further experimentation in the studio or the gallery and yet another unfamiliar conclusion.4 And if at first a piece seems not to do so, well, Bell proposed remaining open anyway. "I am in a position of having a lot of esoteric knowledge," he noted. "I learned a great deal about all kinds of things that I wasn't able to assimilate until much later in my life."5

The trouble, one soon finds, is that language falls short of communicating the esoteric with much clarity. Take a moment to inspect the canvas support of

and the red shape in *Little Blank Riding Hood* (see fig. 4.1). Now, Bell explaining what he was up to: “The painted colored area was an attempt to alter the volume within the canvas plane.” \(^6\) “I started painting a simple volume with one color onto the shaped canvas”—itself already a “geometric illusionary volume”—and, in so doing, “altered the space inside to create a volume in a volume.” \(^7\) Words perform in various ways here. Some convey straightforward detail, as when Bell reports painting forms “with one color onto the shaped canvas.” The phrase is literally true. Elsewhere, language hews to visual interpretation more than to material reality. Each time Bell mentions “volume,” for example, he really means either the red “painted colored area” or the unpainted beige “canvas plane,” both conceived as perfectly flat shapes that suggest axonometric projections of a red bricklike form and a beige boxlike cube, respectively (see figs. 4.2a–4.2d). \(^9\) Fair enough, but then this: a volume “in” a volume. That preposition assigns the physical relationship of enclosure—one thing within another, a brick inside a box—to two immaterial images. The mismatch of incorporeal illusions and real-world positioning in the painting is difficult to describe, out of the ordinary, esoteric. The red solid and beige cube sit uneasily askew, wrenching the space they appear to share. Discrepant projections of both forms alternate and then suddenly flatten out. Images of things and of space in *Little Blank Riding Hood* no longer behave like the things and the spaces we have grown used to. And so one must make do, as Bell did, with “geometric illusionary volume” and other verbal constructions that announce their own inadequacy by approaching abstraction.

Volumetric paintings soon gave way to pictorial volumes. A solid ellipse inside a transparent ellipse may stay flat and still on the panels of Bell’s untitled 1964 cube (see fig. 4.3). \(^10\) Also, though, a curious integration of pictorial illusion and parallax can occur: “As your eye moved,” Bell noticed, “the ellipse divided into combinations of interlocking shapes.” \(^11\) First off, the solid and transparent ellipses call to mind foreshortened circles, two intersecting discs tipped half within the cube and half without. \(^12\) The challenge then is to resolve other aspects of this pictorial configuration. From one position and line of sight, the left edge of each form extends backward. From another, their right edges seem to tilt away. Or it could be the solid shape’s right edge and the transparent form’s left edge that recede. “Which side was forward, which side was back?” Bell mused. “By putting a thinner ellipse, say 25 degrees, with the same major axis inside the 40-degree ellipse, you created a spatial or visual flip-flop . . . that was quite similar visually to what the flat diagrams of the cubes had done.” \(^13\) Visualy but different spatially. The brick and box in *Little Blank Riding Hood* only ever appear in pictorial depth since the actual depth of the painting support is shallow, less than three inches. In the untitled 1964 cube, however, the swiveled discs appear to breach the cubic foot of actual interior space. This is a puzzling phenomenon, a pictorial depth coextensive with real depth.

Other peculiarities arise as three types of space intersect. If you crouch down and face the cube from a certain distance, your reflection appears that same distance beyond the glass or even, impossibly, inside it—a bright, crisp image off or in the mirroring, and a dim, hazy image off or in the transparent areas. \(^14\) These reversed and reflected images of everything in front of the pane
and the red shape in *Little Blank Riding Hood* (see fig. 4.1). Now, Bell explaining what he was up to: “The painted colored area was an attempt to alter the volume within the canvas plane.” “I started painting a simple volume with one color onto the shaped canvas”—itself already a “geometric illusionary volume”—and, in so doing, “altered the space inside to create a volume in a volume.” Words perform in various ways here. Some convey straightforward detail, as when Bell reports painting forms “with one color onto the shaped canvas.” The phrase is literally true. Elsewhere, language hews to visual interpretation more than to material reality. Each time Bell mentions “volume,” for example, he really means either the red “painted colored area” or the unpainted beige “canvas plane,” both conceived as perfectly flat shapes that suggest axonometric projections of a red bricklike form and a beige boxlike cube, respectively (see figs. 4.2a–4.2d). Fair enough, but then this: a volume “in” a volume. That preposition assigns the physical relationship of enclosure—one thing within another, a brick inside a box—to two immaterial images. The mismatch of incorporeal illusions and real-world positioning in the painting is difficult to describe, out of the ordinary, esoteric. The red solid and beige cube sit uneasily askew, wrenching the space they appear to share. Discrepant projections of both forms alternate and then suddenly flatten out. Images of things and of space in *Little Blank Riding Hood* no longer behave like the things and the spaces we have grown used to. And so one must make do, as Bell did, with “geometric illusionary volume” and other verbal constructions that announce their own inadequacy by approaching abstraction.

Volumetric paintings soon gave way to pictorial volumes. A solid ellipse inside a transparent ellipse may stay flat and still on the panels of Bell’s untitled 1964 cube (see fig. 4.3). Also, though, a curious integration of pictorial illusion and parallax can occur: “As your eye moved,” Bell noticed, “the ellipse divided into combinations of interlocking shapes.” First off, the solid and transparent ellipses call to mind foreshortened circles, two intersecting discs tipped half within the cube and half without. The challenge then is to resolve other aspects of this pictorial configuration. From one position and line of sight, the left edge of each form extends backward. From another, their right edges seem to tilt away. Or it could be the solid shape’s right edge and the transparent form’s left edge that recede. “Which side was forward, which side was back?” Bell mused. “By putting a thinner ellipse, say 25 degrees, with the same major axis inside the 40-degree ellipse, you created a spatial or visual flip-flop . . . that was quite similar visually to what the flat diagrams of the cubes had done.” Visually but different spatially. The brick and box in *Little Blank Riding Hood* only ever appear in pictorial depth since the actual depth of the painting support is shallow, less than three inches. In the untitled 1964 cube, however, the swivelled discs appear to breach the cubic foot of actual interior space. This is a puzzling phenomenon, a pictorial depth coextensive with real depth.

Other peculiarities arise as three types of space intersect. If you crouch down and face the cube from a certain distance, your reflection appears that same distance beyond the glass or even, impossibly, inside it—a bright, crisp image off or in the mirroring, and a dim, hazy image off or in the transparent areas. These reversed and reflected images of everything in front of the pane


veil everything actually behind it.19 Real space vies with reflected space here; elsewhere the shapes’ apparent withdrawal into the cube’s interior amounts to pictorial space ruling real; and finally, since the shiny glass surfaces consist of ellipses and other discrete shapes, reflected space clashes with pictorial. Needless to say, a cube’s insides can appear startlingly disjointed. “A jungle of beautiful things . . . happened within,” as Bell put it. “It was hard to tell which (glass) was mirror and which wasn’t mirror.”20 You see straight through a cube in some spots. In others, the inner faces of the panes reflect light entering from the adjacent sides: looking in, you turn to a given panel and see one catercornered. Or an area may reflect the glass opposite it, and that area the glass opposite it, and so on, as light rebounds around the interior, expanding the space you see to well beyond the material confines of the object.

“Representing volume, created with light, reflected and transmitted, was now part of my process,” declared Bell.17 And yet a space originating in the interplay of light and glass is not a representation in the usual sense of that word. Mirrors reflect and reverse; they do not depict or pictorialize. Bell was writing casually, but the detail is significant as an ability to differentiate pictorial, reflected, and real space constitutes discovery of a sort. Familiar words cannot help but complicate comprehension of such raw findings, however. Often enough, new knowledge outpaces your ability to communicate it to others and even to ponder it yourself. New terms, distinctions, lines of inquiry, and principles need to be developed alongside. “The fact that mirrors could contain the depth of whatever it yourself. New terms, distinctions, lines of inquiry, and principles need to be developed alongside. "The fact that mirrors could contain the depth of whatever it meant they just, you know, I recognized the option, the ability to”—he muscles on—"I mean that finally what was the art was not the rods, wasn’t even the room, it was the ability to say this”—searching for the word least unfit—"this presence is what I’m, this is my art”—exasperated—"you see I don’t know how to say it.”21 Bell learned by sensing. He could not verbalize exactly how he had discerned his space’s initial unresponsiveness, attributed this problem to the glass, and then resolved to do away with those previously indispensable forms in order to restore the sought-after “presence.” Saying it, Bell found, could only misrepresent a logic rooted in how things felt.

Even so, art-critical assessment and art-historical recording take place in language, and artists are obliged not only to endure but to assist in the translation of their nonverbal insights. Such expectations of explanation can chafe at times. After a few questions from Wight, Bell thought a caveat necessary. “It doesn’t have to do with words . . . ” Instead of “It’s not what I feel, it’s another set of symbols.”23 By and by Bell had the vowels eliminated from his responses in the published interview transcript, leaving many parts close to illegible: “It doesn’t have to do with words. What I say now comes second to what I feel.” But even that seemed off, a little too literal. “It’s not what I feel, it’s another set of symbols.”24 By and by Bell had the vowels eliminated from his responses in the published interview transcript, leaving many parts close to illegible: “It doesn’t have to do with words.”24 In short, Bell refused to abide by the constraints of language, to pretend to words . . .” instead of “It doesn’t have to do with words . . .” (see fig. 4.5).20 In short, Bell refused to abide by the constraints of language, to pretend that words suffice. The point was to answer nonsense with near-nonsense, to act out for art critics, curators, and historians in their favored medium of language the incoherence of having artists put their works into words.
veil everything actually behind it.” Real space vies with reflected space here; elsewhere the shapes’ apparent withdrawal into the cube’s interior amounts to pictorial space rivaling real; and finally, since the shiny glass surfaces consist of ellipses and other discrete shapes, reflected space clashes with pictorial. Needless to say, a cube’s insides can appear startlingly disjointed. “A jungle of beautiful things . . . happened within,” as Bell put it. “It was hard to tell which [glass] was mirror and which wasn’t mirror.”

You see straight through a cube in some spots. In others, the inner faces of the panes reflect light entering from the adjacent sides: looking in, you turn to a given panel and see one catercornered. Or an area may reflect the glass opposite it, and that area the glass opposite it, and so on, as light rebounds around the interior, expanding the space you see to well beyond the material confines of the object.

“Representing volume, created with light, reflected and transmitted, was now part of my process,” declared Bell. And yet a space originating in the interplay of light and glass is not a representation in the usual sense of that word. Mirrors reflect and reverse; they do not depict or pictorialize. Bell was writing casually, but the detail is significant insofar as an ability to differentiate pictorial, reflected, and real space constitutes discovery of a sort. Familiar words cannot help but complicate comprehension of such raw findings, however. Often enough, new knowledge outpaces your ability to communicate it to others and even to ponder it yourself. New terms, distinctions, lines of inquiry, and principles need to be developed alongside. “The fact that mirrors could contain the depth of whatever it yourself. New terms, distinctions, lines of inquiry, and principles need to be developed alongside. "The fact that mirrors could contain the depth of whatever they reflected was something that was intriguing," Bell realized, “although I didn’t quite clear about what that meant.” As you might expect, the esoteric they reflected was something that was intriguing, “although I thought it was hard to tell which.”

You see straight through a cube in some spots. In others, the inner faces of the panes reflect light entering from the adjacent sides: looking in, you turn to a given panel and see one catercornered. Or an area may reflect the glass opposite it, and that area the glass opposite it, and so on, as light rebounds around the interior, expanding the space you see to well beyond the material confines of the object.

“Representing volume, created with light, reflected and transmitted, was now part of my process,” declared Bell. And yet a space originating in the interplay of light and glass is not a representation in the usual sense of that word. Mirrors reflect and reverse; they do not depict or pictorialize. Bell was writing casually, but the detail is significant insofar as an ability to differentiate pictorial, reflected, and real space constitutes discovery of a sort. Familiar words cannot help but complicate comprehension of such raw findings, however. Often enough, new knowledge outpaces your ability to communicate it to others and even to ponder it yourself. New terms, distinctions, lines of inquiry, and principles need to be developed alongside. “The fact that mirrors could contain the depth of whatever they reflected was something that was intriguing,” Bell realized, “although I didn’t quite clear about what that meant.” As you might expect, the esoteric they reflected was something that was intriguing, “although I thought it was hard to tell which”.

For some idea of what in the catalogue had miffed Plagens, consider a passage from Wight’s discussion with Bell. At the Museum of Modern Art in late 1969, Bell had modified a gallery by painting the walls, floor, and ceiling black and then installing two glass rods at the far end of both narrow corridors formed by a lengthwise interior wall (see fig. 4.4). He set out to construct a similar environment at the Tate a few months later, only to judge the glass segments unsatisfactory. At last Bell removed the rods altogether, which, strangely enough, restored the feel of the perceptual experience offered by the original room that had had the glass. Here is Bell in conversation with Wight, struggling to articulate that improbable outcome: “All the elements of discovery and intuition were right there”—a confident start, but language began to give out—“I mean they just, you know, I recognized the option, the ability to”—he muscled on—“I mean that finally what was the art was not the rods, wasn’t even the room, it was the ability to say this”—searching for the word least unfit—“this presence is what I’m, this is my art”—exasperated—“you see I don’t know how to say it.” Bell learned by sensing. He could not verbalize exactly how he had discerned his space’s initial unresponsiveness, attributed this problem to the glass, and then resolved to do away with those previously indispensable forms in order to restore the sought-after “presence.” Saying it, Bell found, could only misrepresent a logic rooted in how things felt.

Even so, art-critical assessment and art-historical recording take place in language, and artists are obliged not only to endure but to assist in the translation of their nonverbal insights. Such expectations of explanation can chafe at times. After a few questions from Wight, Bell thought a caveat necessary. “It doesn’t have to do with words . . .” instead of “It doesn’t have to do with words . . .” (see fig. 4.5). In short, Bell refused to abide by the constraints of language, to pretend a logic rooted in how things felt. But even that seemed off, a little too literal. “It’s not what I feel, it’s another set of symbols.” By and by Bell had the vowels eliminated from his responses in the published interview transcript, leaving many parts close to illegible: “It’s not what I feel, it’s another set of symbols.” By and by Bell had the vowels eliminated from his responses in the published interview transcript, leaving many parts close to illegible: “It’s not what I feel, it’s another set of symbols.” By and by Bell had the vowels eliminated from his responses in the published interview transcript, leaving many parts close to illegible: “It’s not what I feel, it’s another set of symbols.” By and by Bell had the vowels eliminated from his responses in the published interview transcript, leaving many parts close to illegible: “It’s not what I feel, it’s another set of symbols.” By and by Bell had the vowels eliminated from his responses in the published interview transcript, leaving many parts close to illegible: “It’s not what I feel, it’s another set of symbols.” By and by Bell had the vowels eliminated from his responses in the published interview transcript, leaving many parts close to illegible: “It’s not what I feel, it’s another set of symbols.” By and by Bell had the vowels eliminated from his responses in the published interview transcript, leaving many parts close to illegible: “It’s not what I feel, it’s another set of symbols.” By and by Bell had the vowels eliminated from his responses in the published interview transcript, leaving many parts close to illegible: “It’s not what I feel, it’s another set of symbols.” By and by Bell had the vowels eliminated from his responses in the published interview transcript, leaving many parts close to illegible: “It’s not what I feel, it’s another set of symbols.” By and by Bell had the vowels eliminated from his responses in the published interview transcript, leaving many parts close to illegible: “It’s not what I feel, it’s another set of symbols.” By and by Bell had the vowels eliminated from his responses in the published interview transcript, leaving many parts close to illegible: “It’s not what I feel, it’s another set of symbols.” By and by Bell had the vowels eliminated from his responses in the published interview transcript, leaving many parts close to illegible: “It’s not what I feel, it’s another set of symbols.”
Rather than glib irony or perversity, Bell’s tactics seem to spring from genuine frustration, less with language itself perhaps than with others’ entreaties that he sum up his art on its terms.25 “If I take the position of explaining or clarifying the generalities of what you see when you confront my work, it would be a disservice to both the reader and myself,” he protested earnestly. “I cannot explain the energy that is created by your eye contact with these words, or the light reflecting off this paper. To me the joy of the specifics of the work has to do with this non-verbal energy and information transference.”26 In a sense it is absurd to search for words when the art sits right there, ready to be looked at. You end up cornered, converting real phenomena into vague constructions such as “energy,” “information transference,” and, to use Bell’s phrase, other “abstract symbols.”27 Only when we resist the seductive intelligibility of such words can we learn something truly esoteric from the work.

**Importance and Impermanence**

For Robert Irwin, the practice of art comes down to observation and inquiry, looking and wondering above all else. He was surprised to find that other artists did not always comply with the implications of this stance although ostensibly agreeing with it. A sort of inattention, whether willful or complacent, prevailed at times. Frank Stella, for one, said of his own paintings that “what you see is what you see,” but Irwin detected deviation from this principle during a conversation with him in the early 1970s.28 “He said to me, ‘Why do you go to so much trouble in finishing your paintings, for example, in making the edges on your frames so perfect?’” Irwin’s answer: “Why don’t you? How can you not? . . . Why don’t you make your paintings like your sketches [with perfect, ruled edges]? . . . Or, if not, why don’t you have wobbly edges in your sketches [as they are in the actual paintings]?” Stella: “It’s not important” (see figs. 4.6–4.8).29
Rather than glib irony or perversity, Bell's tactics seem to spring from genuine frustration, less with language itself perhaps than with others' entreaties that he sum up his art on its terms.25 "If I take the position of explaining or clarifying the generalities of what you see when you confront my work, it would be a disservice to both the reader and myself," he protested earnestly. "I cannot explain the energy that is created by your eye contact with these words, or the light reflecting off this paper. To me the joy of the specifics of the work has to do with this non-verbal energy and information transference." 26 In a sense it is absurd to search for words when the art sits right there, ready to be looked at. You end up cornered, converting real phenomena into vague constructions such as "energy," "information transference," and, to use Bell's phrase, other "abstract symbols."27 Only when we resist the seductive intelligibility of such words can we learn something truly esoteric from the work.

For Robert Irwin, the practice of art comes down to observation and inquiry, looking and wondering above all else. He was surprised to find that other artists did not always comply with the implications of this stance although ostensibly agreeing with it. A sort of inattention, whether willful or complacent, prevailed at times. Frank Stella, for one, said of his own paintings that "what you see is what you see," but Irwin detected deviation from this principle during a conversation with him in the early 1970s.28 "He said to me, 'Why do you go to so much trouble in finishing your paintings, for example, in making the edges on your frames so perfectly straight?' " Irwin's answer: "Why don't you? How can you not? . . . Why don't you make your paintings like your sketches [with perfect, ruled edges]? . . . Or, if not, why don't you have wobbly edges in your sketches [as they are in the actual paintings]?" Stella: "It's not important" (see figs. 4.6–4.8).

IMPORTANCE AND IMPERMANENCE

For Robert Irwin, the practice of art comes down to observation and inquiry, looking and wondering above all else. He was surprised to find that other artists did not always comply with the implications of this stance although ostensibly agreeing with it. A sort of inattention, whether willful or complacent, prevailed at times. Frank Stella, for one, said of his own paintings that "what you see is what you see," but Irwin detected deviation from this principle during a conversation with him in the early 1970s.28 "He said to me, 'Why do you go to so much trouble in finishing your paintings, for example, in making the edges on your frames so perfectly straight?' " Irwin's answer: "Why don't you? How can you not? . . . Why don't you make your paintings like your sketches [with perfect, ruled edges]? . . . Or, if not, why don't you have wobbly edges in your sketches [as they are in the actual paintings]?" Stella: "It's not important" (see figs. 4.6–4.8).
Donald Judd, too, minimized the importance of some visual facts by fiat, that is to say, by deploying words. The play of light upon Plexiglas and the shadows his pieces cast are to be regarded as inevitable and therefore negligible, “just a by-product,” as he put it (see fig. 4.9). Robert Rauschenberg, whose five White Paintings of 1951 act as screens for like phenomena, found himself unable to edit out such sights when viewing a work by Judd. In a 1966 symposium, Rauschenberg challenged Judd on the point (see fig. 4.10): “What about the distortion when the light passes through the glass and hits the wall and all of a sudden you have the illusion that this box is closer to you than that one, because of the size or density of its shadow? . . . The shadows were really quite extraordinary and I tried to ignore them, but they certainly defeated what you wanted.” Judd shrugged off these aspects of his objects, as Stella had his edges. “You are bound to have a certain amount of reflection,” he replied to Rauschenberg. And while Judd declared that his “pieces are meant to be looked at,” somehow he could also hold that “the shadows are unimportant.”

Not so for Irwin. He owned a 1969 wall piece by Judd and saw it differently, as suggested by his impromptu distinction between Judd’s art and that of another so-called minimalist, Robert Morris, in a 1971 interview (see figs. 4.11 and 4.12). “There is a great difference between Morris and Donald Judd,” Irwin contended, “and the key to this is the Donald Judds were meant to be looked at, [and] the Morrises were meant to be thought about.” Whereas Irwin recognized material and visual continuity in Judd’s objects, he noticed inconsistencies throughout Morris’s forms and, because of these, concluded that Morris could have only intended a more abstract and conceptual engagement. Visually, the pieces did not cohere:

[Morris] would have a large volume that would seem to have a certain amount of physicality to it, okay? But in making it he would allow the edge to turn up slightly which would belie the weight of the thing, in other words, would actually contradict what the volume was telling you. This was not intentional, this was strictly a matter that he was not interested in on that level, the demand placed on your eye was not severe. Now if that had become critical to him, he might have had to go to great physical lengths to make sure that that little thing didn’t happen.

As Irwin implies, Morris seems to have viewed the upturned edges as decidedly unimportant, since he exhibited the work without fussing over those details. There is little doubt that the distinction Irwin proposed between his two contemporaries afforded an ad hoc judgment more than thoroughgoing analysis; Irwin’s real concern lay in clarifying his own positions instead of those of either Donald Judd, Robert Rauschenberg, Robert Morris, and Robert Irwin.
Donald Judd, too, minimized the importance of some visual facts by fiat, that is to say, by deploying words. The play of light upon Plexiglas and the shadows his pieces cast are to be regarded as inevitable and therefore negligible, “just a by-product,” as he put it (see fig. 4.9).\(^\text{30}\) Robert Rauschenberg, whose five White Paintings of 1951 act as screens for like phenomena, found himself unable to edit out such sights when viewing a work by Judd. In a 1966 symposium, Rauschenberg challenged Judd on the point (see fig. 4.10): “What about the distortion when the light passes through the glass and hits the wall and all of a sudden you have the illusion that this box is closer to you than that one, because of the size or density of its shadow? . . . The shadows were really quite extraordinary and I tried to ignore them, but they certainly defeated what you wanted.”\(^\text{31}\) Judd shrugged off these aspects of his objects, as Stella had his edges. “You are bound to have a certain amount of reflection,” he replied to Rauschenberg.\(^\text{32}\) And while Judd declared that his “pieces are meant to be looked at,” somehow he could also hold that “the shadows are unimportant.”\(^\text{33}\)

Not so for Irwin. He owned a 1969 wall piece by Judd and saw it differently, as suggested by his impromptu distinction between Judd’s art and that of another so-called minimalist, Robert Morris, in a 1971 interview (see figs. 4.11 and 4.12).\(^\text{34}\) “There is a great difference between Morris and Donald Judd,” Irwin contended, “and the key to this is the Donald Judds were meant to be looked at, [and] the Morrises were meant to be thought about.”\(^\text{35}\) Whereas Irwin recognized material and visual continuity in Judd’s objects, he noticed inconsistencies throughout Morris’s forms and, because of these, concluded that Morris could have only intended a more abstract and conceptual engagement. Visually, the pieces did not cohere:

\[\text{[Morris] would have a large volume that would seem to have a certain amount of physicality to it, okay? But in making it he would allow the edge to turn up slightly which would belie the weight of the thing, in other words, would actually contradict what the volume was telling you. This was not intentional, this was strictly a matter that he was not interested in on that level, the demand placed on your eye was not severe. Now if that had become critical to him, he might have had to go to great physical lengths to make sure that that little thing didn’t happen.}\(^\text{36}\)

As Irwin implies, Morris seems to have viewed the upturned edges as decidedly unimportant, since he exhibited the work without fussing over those details. There is little doubt that the distinction Irwin proposed between his two contemporaries afforded an ad hoc judgment more than thoroughgoing analysis; Irwin’s real concern lay in clarifying his own positions instead of those of either

---


\(^{\text{33}}\) Robert Morris, exhibition at Dwan Gallery, Los Angeles, March 15–April 9, 1966.
Judd or Morris. And whereas Morris serves as something of a straw man in the comparison, Judd gets off too easily. After all, Irwin echoed Judd word for word—the pieces are “meant to be looked at”—without taking him to task for his disavowal (possibly unknown to Irwin) of the shadows, reflections, and other phenomena that add up to much of what one sees when looking at clear anodized aluminum and purple lacquer.

In Irwin’s own art, beginning with his dot paintings and then plainely in the subsequent discs, the reappearance of the shadow counts as a central lesson (see figs. 4.13 and 4.14). “I could no longer confine my eye to what was in the frame of my paintings,” he came to realize. “I discovered for the first time the world of the phenomenal immersed in the heretofore incidental shadow.” And when shadows receive attention, when impermanent phenomena are taken to be important, one starts to see the richness of the visual flux all around all the time: “If you begin to assume that the object is no more real than the space around it, no more important than the shadows, it is simply one of a series of events, and you begin to try to deal with the consequences of that, then it becomes obvious you can’t make an object any longer or you can’t make anything that is not relative to the circumstances that it exists in.”

Five years before this 1976 statement, when so succinct and confident a conclusion must have been more of an intuitive hunch, Irwin altered a utility stairway in UCLA’s Dickson Art Center as his contribution to the Transparency, Reflection, Light, Space show. “My intention,” he wrote, “is to condition the stairway in UCLA’s Dickson Art Center as his contribution to the Transparency, Reflection, Light, Space show.” “My intention,” he wrote, “is to condition the spaces so as to attend the qualities of the ambient light.”

It may well be that no photographs of Irwin’s UCLA work exist. All we have are words, and those reports from art critics and others vary a bit as to what exactly was there. One writer identified a “dense, translucent net fitted in the stairwell.” Another described “an ordinary stairwell [modified] by slightly altering its scale (through a small semi-translucent ceiling) and by minutely controlling the shade of white in which everything relating to the space, including a window sash, is painted.” And a third wrote of “a stairwell painted white, with a finely woven white scrim stretched across the area of the stairwell at some distance from the ceiling; the area was painted a white particularly sensitive to ambient color and light, and some moldings and fixtures were also painted or covered with white contact paper.” Irwin himself recalled how “one of the things that was very nice about it was that all the light in there was reflected.” Sun rays ricocheted off an adjacent red building or green grass nearby, shone in through the windows, and tinted the interior accordingly. “At a certain time of the day it was violet, and another time of the day it was green, and another time of the day it was a subtle mixture of colors.” All this may sound commonplace when put into words, but you have to look long enough for the eyes to recalibrate and then register such phenomena. At least Stella and Judd had done that much—what they ended up dismissing they had perceived in the first place. Irwin surmised that their ensuing deliberate disregard, as well as the more typical case of unintentional inattention, stemmed from the transience of many potential stimuli. “One of the problems with phenomena is that they don’t last,” he submitted. “We’ve never allowed those things really to be in our art because they are not physically transcending enough, they’re not permanent enough.”

At first Irwin had trouble reconciling his practice with the impermanent phenomena that it revealed. In Transparency, Reflection, Light, Space, he was teaching himself and learning on the fly. “I think I probably made an error,” he admitted. “When I put a piece of scrim material up near the second floor, up high, and stretched it out flat.” This addition concentrated and accentuated the tints of sunlight as planned, but in a way it also resembled an art object, something akin to a Rauschenberg White Painting. Viewers too readily glued on to the exotic element and ignored how the same colors spilled throughout the workaday stairwell. “Oh, that’s it,” most said upon noticing the sheet of fabric, as Irwin remembered. “[They] dealt with the scrim as though it were the art... it enhanced the situation, but not enough to warrant its being there. It failed in the sense that it distracted.” The stretched scrim amounted to a self-defeating solution in this case, a fixed frame for chromatic ephemera and, as such, a pictorial convention that enfeebled fresh sights. Coming to terms with the miscalculation, Irwin concluded, “I made it too visible, I did a thing which was not necessary.” Lesson learned: the impermanent phenomena were important; the scrim was not.

Failure by distraction also aptly summarizes the basis for Irwin’s reluctance to allow images of his art. “What is lost when you make the photograph?”
Judd or Morris. And whereas Morris serves as something of a straw man in the comparison, Judd gets off too easily.\textsuperscript{47} After all, Irwin echoed Judd word for word—"the pieces are “meant to be looked at,” without taking him to task for his disavowal (possibly unknown to Irwin) of the shadows, reflections, and other phenomena that add up to much of what one sees when looking at clear anodized aluminum and purple lacquer.\textsuperscript{48}

In Irwin’s own art, beginning with his dot paintings and then plainly in the subsequent discs, the reappearance of the shadow counts as a central lesson (see figs. 4.13 and 4.14). “I could no longer confine my eye to what was in the frame of my paintings,” he came to realize. “I discovered for the first time the world of the phenomenal immersed in the heretofore incidental shadow.”\textsuperscript{49} And when shadows receive attention, when impermanent phenomena are taken to be important, one starts to see the richness of the visual flux all around all the time: “If you begin to assume that the object is no more real than the space around it, no more important than the shadows, it is simply one of a series of events, and you begin to try to deal with the consequences of that, then it becomes obvious you can’t make an object any longer or you can’t make anything that is not relative to the circumstances that it exists in.”\textsuperscript{50}

Five years before this 1976 statement, when so succinct and confident a conclusion must have been more of an intuitive hunch, Irwin altered a utility stairway in UCLA’s Dickson Art Center as his contribution to the Transparency, Reflection, Light, Space show.\textsuperscript{51} “My intention,” he wrote, “is to condition the spaces so as to attend the qualities of the ambient light.”\textsuperscript{52}

It may well be that no photographs of Irwin’s UCLA work exist.\textsuperscript{53} All we have are words, and those reports from art critics and others vary a bit as to what exactly was there. One writer identified a “dense, translucent net fitted in the stairwell.”\textsuperscript{54} Another described “an ordinary stairwell [modified] by slightly altering its scale (through a small semi-translucent ceiling) and by minutely controlling the shade of white in which everything relating to the space, including a window sash, is painted.”\textsuperscript{55} And a third wrote of “a stairwell painted white, with a finely woven white scrim stretched across the area of the stairwell at some distance from the ceiling; the area was painted a white particularly sensitive to ambient color and light, and some moldings and fixtures were also painted or covered with white contact paper.”\textsuperscript{56} Irwin himself recalled how “one of the things that was very nice about it was that all the light in there was reflected.”\textsuperscript{57} Sun rays ricocheted off an adjacent red building or green grass nearby, shone in through the windows, and tinted the interior accordingly. “At a certain time of the day it was violet, and another time of the day it was green, and another time of the day it was a subtle mixture of colors.”\textsuperscript{58} All this may sound commonplace when put into words, but you have to look long enough for the eyes to recalibrate and then register such phenomena. At least Stella and Judd had done that much—what they ended up dismissing they had perceived in the first place. Irwin surmised that their ensuing deliberate disregard, as well as the more typical case of unintentional inattention, stemmed from the transience of many potential stimuli. “One of the problems with phenomena is that they don’t last,” he submitted. “We’ve never allowed those things really to be in our art because they are not physically transcending enough, they’re not permanent enough.”\textsuperscript{59}

At first Irwin had trouble reconciling his practice with the impermanent phenomena that it revealed. In Transparency, Reflection, Light, Space, he was teaching himself and learning on the fly. “I think I probably made an error,” he admitted. “When I put a piece of scrim material up near the second floor, up high, and stretched it out flat.”\textsuperscript{60} This addition concentrated and accentuated the tints of sunlight as planned, but in a way it also resembled an art object, something akin to a Rauschenberg White Painting. Viewers too readily glommed on to the exotic element and ignored how the same colors spilled throughout the workaday stairwell. “Oh, that’s it,” most said upon noticing the sheet of fabric, as Irwin remembered. “They dealt with the scrim as though it were the art... it enhanced the situation, but not enough to warrant its being there. It failed in the sense that it distracted.”\textsuperscript{61} The stretched scrim amounted to a self-defeating solution in this case, a fixed frame for chromatic ephemera and, as such, a pictorial convention that enfeebled fresh sights. Coming to terms with the miscalculation, Irwin concluded, “I made it too visible, I did a thing which was not necessary.”\textsuperscript{62} Lesson learned: the impermanent phenomena were important; the scrim was not.

Failure by distraction also aptly summarizes the basis for Irwin’s reluctance to allow images of his art.\textsuperscript{63} “What is lost when you make the photograph?”
he asked. “A great deal.” A photographic reproduction stands in as a depthless and still document of visible electromagnetic radiation—light without real space or time. Such a facsimile may present negligible drawbacks for some practices, for others a calculated sacrifice, for Irwin a senseless concession. “It’s leaving out too much information,” he decided. “The real actual phenomenon, the thing itself, the scale of it, the event itself . . . does not really exist in the photograph.” That fact, so straightforward as to verge on platitude, in truth tends to escape deliberation. In an odd twist, the sheer obviousness of a photograph’s irresolvable inaccuracy diverts attention from this very shortcoming. And because of that, an image may not be better than nothing, flat, split-second snippets of radiant light—whether imprinted by the photochemical reduction of silver ions or by sampling the photoelectrical charge of pixels on a microchip—transform more than reproduce the real phenomena before the aperture. Granted, cameras capture something of appearances. But it bears repeating that most features of visual stimuli (to say nothing of impressions on the other faculties) elude existing apparatuses designed to record and represent the world as perceived.

Much the same goes for writing, a method beset with compromises whereby one unsatisfactorily reproduces works of art. Irwin’s word for such verbiage: midwifery. “The ability to pass information on without ever knowing the original experience,” in other words, “that assumption that by the use of symbols or marks one can portray or illuminate or illustrate or even talk about something that actually exists. . . . It’s what a critic often does. Here’s an experience and you’re over there, so he midwifes it to you.” Irwin scrutinized the convenient but deceptive endurance of language, as he had with photographic documentation. “You gain this permanence,” he allowed, “by putting it down in a written word. But you lose a great deal in terms of the essence when you go to writing.” “While language is our connection to the accumulative records of other people’s experience—it is not the extent of knowing.” Self-evident perhaps but, as before, belabored out of necessity: the actual phenomenon, the thing and the event, its scale and its essence, are all lost to words. Irwin’s art demands your presence. “Re-presentations are never the things per-se,” he emphasized, and “midwifing experience is absurd for this reason: the relationship between art and viewer is all first hand now experience, and there is no way that it can be carried to you through any kind of secondary system,” be it “writing, reading, photography, [or] video tape.”

To be sure, Irwin provokes some unease in the art historian by insisting upon what one forfeits when transposing phenomena into language. Academics, after all, have a tendency to start from, think with, and produce in words. Although visual or otherwise perceptual observation underpins most writers’ regimens, verbal and photographic midwifery predominates. “[In] photography . . . there is a lot of incredible distortion.” Deaf to Irwin’s warning, the essay before you presumes to offer precisely these images in place of the actual work. “In the art world incredible amounts of decisions are based on the artist’s words.” If anything, the present account exacerbates that predicament with its reliance on Bell’s and Irwin’s remarks. “When you write about it, it just gets screwed up.” And yet here we are once again amid words.

HOW WORDS WORK WELL

That rather dour conclusion has an upside of sorts. We stand before an artwork—Bell’s, Irwin’s, anyone’s—and blunder about for insight when the piece proves too inscrutable for analytical shortcuts and verbal shorthand. Such a struggle is invigorating, or can be. An encounter outside common concepts and terms confirms that, sure enough, much yet remains to see, to feel, and to understand even after decades of looking at art. To put it another way, if the words we already have exist because prior examples have come about, then the degree to which art wards off ideas intelligible in language hints at how esoteric a piece once was and may still be. It would seem from this that an artist is onto something whenever words do not quite work.

Of course, nothing defies language for long. Words inevitably catch up to art and take hold, sometimes determining from then on what one sees in it and of it. Over the years, Irwin has made reference here and there to Zen Buddhism (“I had a minor-league interest and involvement in Zen”), and over the years, art historians and others have dwelled on that fact, teasing out associations between the artworks and the philosophy. Bell too has offered interviewers an abstraction on occasion. He considered but decided against “sexy” and
he asked. “A great deal.” A photographic reproduction stands in as a depthless and still document of visible electromagnetic radiation—light without real space or time. Such a facsimile may present negligible drawbacks for some practices, for others a calculated sacrifice, but for Irwin a senseless concession. “It’s leaving out too much information,” he decided. “The real actual phenomenon, the thing itself, the scale of it, the event itself . . . does not really exist in the photograph.” That fact, so straightforward as to verge on platitude, in truth tends to escape deliberation. In an odd twist, the sheer obviousness of a photograph’s irresolvable inaccuracy diverts attention from this very shortcoming. And because of that, an image may not be better than nothing. Flat, split-second snippets of radiant light—whether imprinted by the photochemical reduction of silver ions or by sampling the photoelectrical charge of pixels on a microchip—transform more than reproduce the real phenomena before the aperture. Granted, cameras capture something of appearances. But it bears repeating that most features of visual stimuli (to say nothing of impressions on the other faculties) elude existing apparatuses designed to record and represent the world as perceived.

Much the same goes for writing, a method beset with compromises whereby one unsatisfactorily reproduces works of art. Irwin’s word for such verbiage: midwifery.

“The ability to pass information on without ever knowing the original experience,” in other words, “that assumption that by the use of symbols or marks one can portray or illuminate or illustrate or even talk about something that actually exists. . . . It’s what a critic often does. Here’s an experience and you’re over there, so he midwifes it to you.” Irwin scrutinized the convenient but deceptive endurance of language, as he had with photographic documentation. “You gain this permanence,” he allowed, “by putting it down in a written word. But you lose a great deal in terms of the essence when you go to writing.” “While language is our connection to the accumulative records of other people’s experience—it is not the extent of knowing.” Self-evident perhaps but, as before, belabored out of necessity: the actual phenomenon, the thing and the event, its scale and its essence, are all lost to words. Irwin’s art demands your presence. “Re-presentations are never the things per-se,” he emphasized, and “midwifing experience is absurd for this reason: the relationship between art and viewer is all first hand now experience, and there is no way that it can be carried to you through any kind of secondary system,” be it “writing, reading, photography, [or] video tape.”

To be sure, Irwin provokes some unease in the art historian by insisting upon what one forfeits when transposing phenomena into language. Academics, after all, have a tendency to start from, think with, and produce in words. Although visual or otherwise perceptual observation underpins most writers’ regimens, verbal and photographic midwifery predominate. “[In] photography . . . there is a lot of incredible distortion.” Deaf to Irwin’s warning, the essay before you presumes to offer precisely these images in place of the actual work. “In the art world incredible amounts of decisions are based on the artist’s words.” If anything, the present account exacerbates that predicament with its reliance on Bell’s and Irwin’s remarks. “When you write about it, it just gets screwed up.” And yet here we are once again amid words.

How Words Work Well

That rather dour conclusion has an upside of sorts. We stand before an artwork—Bell’s, Irwin’s, anyone’s—and blunder about for insight when the piece proves too inscrutable for analytical shortcuts and verbal shorthand. Such a struggle is invigorating, or can be. An encounter outside common concepts and terms confirms that, sure enough, much yet remains to see, to feel, and to understand even after decades of looking at art. To put it another way, if the words we already have exist because prior examples have come about, then the degree to which art eludes intelligible language hints at how esoteric a piece once was and may still be. It would seem from this that an artist is onto something whenever words do not quite work.

Of course, nothing defies language for long. Words inevitably catch up to art and take hold, sometimes determining from then on what one sees in it and of it. Over the years, Irwin has made reference here and there to Zen Buddhism (“I had a minor-league interest and involvement in Zen”), and over the years, art historians and others have dwelled on that fact, teasing out associations between the artworks and the philosophy. Bell too has offered interviewers an abstraction on occasion. He considered but decided against “sexy” and
"sensual" during a 1972 conversation before settling on a way to say that his pieces “feel soft.” Since they do not in reality feel soft, one may take that comment as a metaphorical turn of phrase, an allusion to commonplace things that do feel soft, such as the human body (recall that “sexy” and “sensual” were also in the running), all of which amounts to an enticing invitation to elaborate on how the strange work of art before you resembles something much more familiar.

But one can learn from a metaphor in other ways. One can make discoveries by pinpointing its inaccuracies rather than by complying with its plea to look for explanation elsewhere, in an object or a concept thought to be better understood. When Irwin mentions Zen, for instance, he is actually trying to describe specifics of his practice: his introduction to raku (“pottery earthenware . . . with very simple Zen gestures in them, like a thumbmark or a break”), his try at gestural painting (“you got yourself into a good Zen mood and emoted”), his meticulous finishing of the supports of the dot paintings (as with “the Zen pottery ware[,] if you’re involved in it as more than a gesture or an idea, [it] should read all the way through”), and his resolution to apply lessons learned in the studio to his perception of and participation in the outside world (“Why did the Zen monk live on a mountain? . . . When I walk out of that door I’m in an objective society and I must function accordingly.”) Zen evokes a great deal more than these uses by Irwin, and, in following those rich connotations on and on, one’s account becomes more an exploration of Zen’s rich connotations and less a thinking through of how the artist’s experiences, developments, techniques, and principles affect the art. And so when Bell talks of a soft feel, we might remain wary of diversion and try to see or to sense exactly which aspects of the glass he could not communicate without the abstract language. The hazy appearance of areas that are partly reflective and partly transparent? How the hard-edged panes blend away into their surrounds? The tendency to want to touch the surfaces in hopes of confirming visual input with tactile? It is hard to know. A figurative trope attests to the difficulty of saying plainly what was to be said more than it fulfills its promise of explaining through substitution. Treated as a shortcoming of description rather than as a revelatory key, metaphor alerts us to that which we comprehend the least and ought most to reexamine directly.

Our everyday expertise with the clear-cut assertions and easygoing allusions of language can pose problems if we try to learn something very new or very strange from art. Literal or abstract, any conclusion expressed in words conceals the resistance of visual phenomena to verbal logic. This gap provides one possible starting point for thinking about a piece. In meditating upon which words to assign to it, you come to see precisely how in each case the best available ones fall short. Self-defeating constructions may be entirely appropriate in such circumstances. More than anything, Irwin’s inclusion of translated Zen poetry in a small 1959 exhibition catalogue ends up reinforcing the impasse between his paintings and the poems (see fig. 4.15). Bell’s thinking of his canvas support as a “geometric illusionary volume” and his notion that panes of glass can “feel soft” prompt you to stop and assess the validity of those formulations. Likewise, in one’s own engagement, picking words and testing them helps you to look harder and to see more. While words may obscure art’s strangeness at first, their failings—if noticed—restore it.
"sensual" during a 1972 conversation before settling on a way to say that his pieces “feel soft.” Since they do not in reality feel soft, one may take that comment as a metaphorical turn of phrase, an allusion to commonplace things that do feel soft, such as the human body (recall that “sexy” and “sensual” were also in the running), all of which amounts to an enticing invitation to elaborate on how the strange work of art before you resembles something much more familiar.

But one can learn from a metaphor in other ways. One can make discoveries by pinpointing its inaccuracies rather than by complying with its plea to look for explanation elsewhere, in an object or a concept thought to be better understood. When Irwin mentions Zen, for instance, he is actually trying to describe specifics of his practice: his introduction to raku (“pottery earthenware . . . with very simple Zen gestures in them, like a thumbmark or a break”), his try at gestural painting (“you got yourself into a good Zen mood and emoted”), his meticulous finishing of the supports of the dot paintings (as with “the Zen pottery ware[,] if you’re involved in it as more than a gesture or an idea, [it] should read all the way through”), and his resolution to apply lessons learned in the studio to his perception of and participation in the outside world (“Why did the Zen monk live on a mountain? . . . When I walk out of that door I’m in an objective society and I must function accordingly”). Zen evokes a great deal more than these uses by Irwin, and, in following those rich connotations on and on, one’s account becomes more an exploration of Zen’s rich connotations and less a thinking through of how the artist’s experiences, developments, techniques, and principles affect the art. And so when Bell talks of a soft feel, we might remain wary of diversion and try to see or to sense exactly which aspects of the glass he could not communicate without the abstract language. The hazy appearance of areas that are partly reflective and partly transparent? How the hard-edged panes blend away into their surrounds? The tendency to want to touch the surfaces in hopes of confirming visual input with tactile? It is hard to know. A figurative trope attests to the difficulty of saying plainly what was to be said more than it fulfills its promise of explaining through substitution. Treated as a shortcoming of description rather than as a revelatory key, metaphor alerts us to that which we comprehend the least and ought most to reexamine directly.

Our everyday expertise with the clear-cut assertions and easygoing allusions of language can pose problems if we try to learn something very new or very strange from art. Literal or abstract, any conclusion expressed in words conceals the resistance of visual phenomena to verbal logic. This gap provides one possible starting point for thinking about a piece. In meditating upon which words to assign to it, you come to see precisely how in each case the best available ones fall short. Self-defeating constructions may be entirely appropriate in such circumstances. More than anything, Irwin’s inclusion of translated Zen poetry in a small 1959 exhibition catalogue ends up reinforcing the impasse between his paintings and the poems (see fig. 4.15). Bell’s thinking of his canvas support as a “geometric illusionary volume” and his notion that panes of glass can “feel soft” prompt you to stop and assess the validity of those formulations. Likewise, in one’s own engagement, picking words and testing them helps you to look harder and to see more. While words may obscure art’s strangeness at first, their failings—if noticed—restore it.

7. “I have always striven for that kind of symmetry. In the case the rotation of paintings with the same height and width, irrespective of the size of the piece. So, a ten-inch piece in inches square.” For works whose sides are shorter than in her extrapolation of a general principle in art archives, New York; and letter from Palmer to Kerry Kingsley, a curatorial staff member, referring to rods and not art archives, New York; and letter from Palmer to Kerry Kingsley, a curatorial staff member, referring to rods and not.

8. “Luckily Bell’s piece does not reflect his penchant for foreshortened shapes in linear perspective (see note 9). There about forty-eight inches [from] the top of the piece to the iceberg and its shadow. “I wasn’t really thinking of it as an iceberg and its shadow. As for the titles of Bell’s artworks, they often invite


19. “The artists were interviewed,” wrote Wight, “in the Calendar section, 49. In 1980, Bell substituted glass rods for the glass “panels” one

22. Bell, in Wight, “An Interview with Larry Bell,” 169, 9. The reproduction of is irreversible. It is usually necessary to bend down a bit if you want to convey recession in depth.

23. Bell, in Wight, “An Interview with Larry Bell,” 39 (emphasis in original). In Weschler’s account of


13. Bell, “In Reflection,” in Wight, “An Interview with Larry Bell,” 16. As for the titles of Bell’s artworks, they often invite

12. For works whose sides are shorter than. “I have always striven for that kind of symmetry. In the case

1. Bell, “First Person Singular” Larry Bell (note 1), 16. No italics. Don’t


6. The reproduction of. “I have always striven for that kind of symmetry. In the case

2. Bell, “First Person Singular” (note 1), 16. Larry Bell is a visual artist and sculptor, and his work is characterized by an emphasis on geometric forms and spatial relationships. He is known for his use of transparent materials and his exploration of light and its effects on space. Bell’s work often incorporates the illusion of depth and movement, and he is celebrated for his contributions to the development of minimalism in art. His pieces are often constructed from simple materials such as glass, metal, or stone, and are designed to be experienced in a specific spatial context. Bell’s work has been influential in the development of art movements such as environmental art and site-specific art, and his installations have been exhibited in museums and galleries around the world. Bell passed away in 2008, and his work continues to be celebrated for its innovative use of materials and space.
Photographic reversal, Bell has confirmed that he permits mirror reversal as part of the work itself. See Larry Bell, "Light vs. Weight," in Larry Bell, exh. cat. (Santa Fe: Museum of Fine Arts, 1984), pp. 26–27; Richard H. Sennett, "Larry Bell," in Artists Documentation Program interview transcript, New York, November 1965, pp. 33–35.

Larry Bell, exh. cat. (Santa Fe: Museum of Fine Arts, 1984), 22. One art critic pointed out how Bell uses color to create a picture that "looks just like the original object and appears to be just as far away as the original object and then off mirrored glass] create a picture that [cubes] actually want to be a little bit lower; they want to be about forty-eight inches [from] the top of the piece to the bottoms, and fronts, hung on the wall one after the other at intervals. The work the viewer is asked to look at is a hard-edge painter, but in the sense that is an illusion just in the technical meaning of the word "Hard-edge." He's joined this idea, but it isn't really in him, because sometimes he simply can't leave these things unresolved. Kasmin, Elkin, and Wiseman, 1965–1970, p. 405.


170

In correspondence with potential buyers, galleries generally receive a list of works available from the artist and the difficulty of photographing the works. See a letter from Fred Perl, 45 (n.d.); and Robert Irwin, “Interview with Alistair Mackintosh,” 47. In correspondence with potential buyers, the artist responded to the request for a photograph of the work by saying, “I was asked to look at the work and then consider the amount of time it would take to do it. In the end, I decided not to do it.” See a letter from Fred Perl, 45 (n.d.).

Irwin, in Wight, “Robert Irwin,” 170, 171.

In correspondence with potential buyers, the artist responded to the request for a photograph of the work by saying, “I was asked to look at the work and then consider the amount of time it would take to do it. In the end, I decided not to do it.” See a letter from Fred Perl, 45 (n.d.).

Irwin, in Wight, “Robert Irwin,” 170, 171.

In correspondence with potential buyers, the artist responded to the request for a photograph of the work by saying, “I was asked to look at the work and then consider the amount of time it would take to do it. In the end, I decided not to do it.” See a letter from Fred Perl, 45 (n.d.).

Irwin, in Wight, “Robert Irwin,” 170, 171.

In correspondence with potential buyers, the artist responded to the request for a photograph of the work by saying, “I was asked to look at the work and then consider the amount of time it would take to do it. In the end, I decided not to do it.” See a letter from Fred Perl, 45 (n.d.).

Irwin, in Wight, “Robert Irwin,” 170, 171.

In correspondence with potential buyers, the artist responded to the request for a photograph of the work by saying, “I was asked to look at the work and then consider the amount of time it would take to do it. In the end, I decided not to do it.” See a letter from Fred Perl, 45 (n.d.).

Irwin, in Wight, “Robert Irwin,” 170, 171.

In correspondence with potential buyers, the artist responded to the request for a photograph of the work by saying, “I was asked to look at the work and then consider the amount of time it would take to do it. In the end, I decided not to do it.” See a letter from Fred Perl, 45 (n.d.).

Irwin, in Wight, “Robert Irwin,” 170, 171.

In correspondence with potential buyers, the artist responded to the request for a photograph of the work by saying, “I was asked to look at the work and then consider the amount of time it would take to do it. In the end, I decided not to do it.” See a letter from Fred Perl, 45 (n.d.).

Irwin, in Wight, “Robert Irwin,” 170, 171.

In correspondence with potential buyers, the artist responded to the request for a photograph of the work by saying, “I was asked to look at the work and then consider the amount of time it would take to do it. In the end, I decided not to do it.” See a letter from Fred Perl, 45 (n.d.).

Irwin, in Wight, “Robert Irwin,” 170, 171.

In correspondence with potential buyers, the artist responded to the request for a photograph of the work by saying, “I was asked to look at the work and then consider the amount of time it would take to do it. In the end, I decided not to do it.” See a letter from Fred Perl, 45 (n.d.).

Irwin, in Wight, “Robert Irwin,” 170, 171.

In correspondence with potential buyers, the artist responded to the request for a photograph of the work by saying, “I was asked to look at the work and then consider the amount of time it would take to do it. In the end, I decided not to do it.” See a letter from Fred Perl, 45 (n.d.).
constant contradictions as a physical object which there are

15–April 1, 1966. Morris’s solo exhibition at Dwan Gallery, Los Angeles, March

hollow, plywood or Fiberglas forms from the mid- to late

Donald Judd, “Discussion with Donald Judd,” a 1965–67 aluminum disc by Irwin. See Angeli Janhsen, Catalogue Raisonné

34. Judd fabricated the piece he had promised to Irwin

least first or primarily, a particular phenomenon.” See Judd, “I want a particular, definite object. I think Flavin wants, at

integral, material artwork. In either case, it seems clear that

But I want very much to maintain the impression to

William L. Pereira and Associates, “First Floor Plan—South

27, 1970. Calendar section, 52; Ias lan Gorton, “Andre

4. In his interview with Alastair Mackintosh, Bell explained, “I am...