

# Robert Irwin



# The Hidden Structures of Art

Art is art-as-art and everything else is everything else.  
—Ad Reinhardt<sup>1</sup>

## A RADICAL ART HISTORY

As students or artists we begin simply enough  
with a blank canvas, and we don't think to ask ourselves:  
what does that mean?

When we make a mark on that clean white expanse  
and somehow magically it becomes a positive  
in a sea of negative space, we don't ask ourselves:  
how does that happen?

And when we compound our marks  
into a variety of figurations—and see *in them* a variety of meanings,  
we don't wonder to ourselves:  
what does *that* mean?

Instead we simply accept this world of  
compounded meanings, marks, and frame as given.  
Or, at least, we could until we were confronted by a history as radical  
as that of modern art's, and were made painfully aware  
that such hidden orthodoxies are indeed open to question.

When in the relatively short period of one century we could begin  
with a pictorial reality so brilliantly conceived and executed as, say,  
Jacques Louis David's *The Coronation of Napoleon and Josephine* (1805–07)  
and within only a few generations find our world turned so upside-down  
as to be confronted by the stark reality  
of [Kazimir] Malevich's *Suprematist Composition: White on White* (1918)  
and challenged by his declaration that this “desert” of a canvas  
was in fact “a world of pure feeling,”  
then such seemingly abstract and fruitless questions as those asked above  
become quite relevant.

This history is neither accidental nor incidental.  
It is an almost methodical step-by-step de-structuring  
of those logics underwriting a pictorial reality—  
hierarchies of meanings as once ordered by transcendent beliefs  
or singular concepts of truth and social order.

In Western thought it has become embedded in each of us  
to first search out the quantitative in everything—  
without fully realizing that in the headlong pursuit of such practicalities  
we have inevitably developed a resistance  
to all that is ineffable in experience.  
Show us an Abstract Expressionist painting and we quickly ask:  
what is it? or what does it mean?

Questions which in effect say: take this thing, which is right in front of me—  
and let me understand it, not by experiencing it, but by referencing it away from its  
immediate presence to whatever it is we assume it is intended to *re-present*.  
Making it once again into a duality of abstraction, vis-à-vis the singularity,  
“it is,” it was declared to be by the artists.

To this day most of us still try to Rorschach or psychoanalyze these works of art.  
The problem here is not a matter of there being anything wrong  
with “practical” thinking *per se*,  
but more a question of our misapplying the usefulness of its logics  
outside their area of competence.

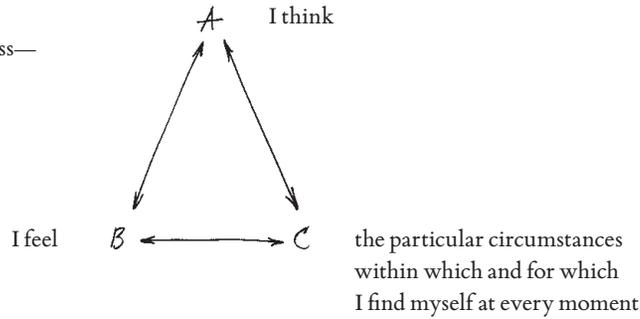
I mean if I ask you, “How many homeless people does  $E=mc^2$  house?”  
and the answer is none, can I conclude from this that  $E=mc^2$  is meaningless,  
or have I simply asked the wrong question?

Modern art's seeming “impracticality” was and still is misconstrued  
in the view of many as art's having lost its way.

On the contrary, the degree of art's estrangement from such seeming “norms”  
is in fact an actual measurement of the depth of implied change, not only in art,  
but in art's implications for radical social change—  
beginning with the fundamental problem: you can't get there from here.

To assume that everything can and should reveal itself  
in terms you are already familiar with  
is the hallmark of conventional thinking.  
But to require that B reveal itself in terms of A  
is to negate the very meaning of B *in* itself.  
That we both think and feel,  
and that they are fundamentally different,  
is self-evident.  
This relationship is not some thesis met by an anti-thesis in an intellectual vacuum.  
It is a complex, real-time intersection  
of equally necessary complements—  
the conditional resolution of which is in the process  
of my continuously reasoning—making whole—my actually being in the world.  
This triangulation of our consciousness—

This triangulation  
of our consciousness—



—is the dynamic of our being phenomenally in the world as an active participant in its becoming real for us. This is the nexus of modern thought. That we make and remake (choose) our own reality (at least in part) may well be the only truly creative human action.

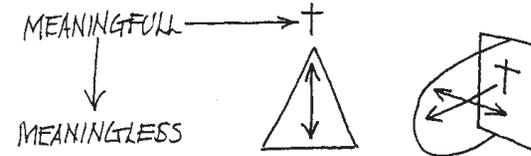
#### THE HIDDEN ORTHODOXY OF PICTORIAL LOGIC

The idea of questioning something so fundamental as our own grasp on “reality” is to say the least a tricky one.

To start with, we don’t have an actual place to begin at the beginning. We are, of course, immersed in this world as we have already come to know it—our own orthodoxies neatly hidden behind the obvious—is i.e., what it is we think we already know.

Take the case in point—is the orthodoxy of the frame and mark as somehow a given in art. One look around tells us there are no such frames in our perception of the world. And as to the marks we make on our canvas, they acquire their special significance by virtue of being seen as intended—as opposed to something accidental or found, a scratch or a blemish. This *significance* has the power to raise our marks out of—above—their incidental surroundings, thereby establishing the fundamental figure/ground relationship that underwrites the highly stylized learned logic of pictorial perception.

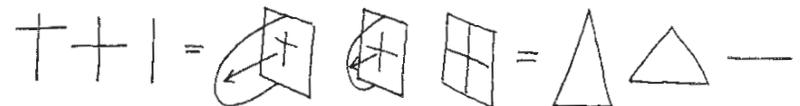
*The Coronation of Napoleon and Josephine* provides us with a classic illustration of the consequences of this concept of “figure and ground” carried to its extreme—of how in pictorial art an abstract hierarchy of mark, frame, and meaning content translates structurally as deep pictorial space with carefully meaning-structured strata of composition.



Once such a meaning structure is clearly in place it will come to further condition *what* as well as *how* we see. This meaningful/meaningless hierarchy of figure/ground, positive/negative ordering will carry over to affect our sense of thing and non-thing, real and unreal, and finally even to determine what is seen and not seen.

Such a learned logic, once in place, will condition our perception to simply omit that which has been pre-determined to have no real meaning-content. Of course we all think we simply see, and in a manner of speaking we do—but do we really? How many times have you forgotten your keys and had to go back into the house to find them? But with your mind still preoccupied you can look straight at your keys and still not see them. In this same sense (our perception tied up with attending) we pass through the world habituating and editing out much more than we ever acknowledge. These are not simply idle games we play on Sundays at the art museum. Seeing is the initial act of valuing, and the nature and infinite potential of human beings to see and to aesthetically order the world is the *one pure subject of art*.

Consider now for a moment the implications of *Malevich's Suprematist Composition: White on White*. Besides representing the culmination of the nineteenth-century process of devaluing the meaning/content of the pictorial “mark,” it exhibits the results of the corresponding physical and structural changes that led to the space of painting becoming increasingly shallow, now to be virtually flat, paint and surface becoming increasingly physical, the relationship of edges—how things meet and touch each other—now even more palpable and telling, color and scale both real and first hand. Structurally, the import is in the flattening of the traditional hierarchy of ordering relationships.



Now what if we were to take all of this—the implications of the changes in nineteenth-century art and the conditions of Malevich’s art—seriously? (But then how else do we actually value something?) What then? A mark with no meaning? A painting space with only the particulars of paint, and no ordering devices to aid us in understanding what we see? How do we live with that?

#### A NON-HIERARCHICAL ORDER

No artists worth their salt have ever tried to make their art abstract—as in obscure. Artists have always tried to make their art as real as is humanly possible. What is at stake here is what we mean by the term *real*.

The populist argument against modernism has always centered on the loss of the beloved figure to modernism’s so-called “abstractions.” The mistake in this kind of thinking is in treating humanism and the human figure as one and the same. On the contrary, in this shift in form something more profound than a simple shift in style has taken place. The abstract sign, human-figure, has been replaced by an expanded responsibility for the individual artist/observer as actively charged with completing the *full intent* of the work of art—*experientially*.

To compound this argument: in art the term *humanism* is most critically linked with the difficult concept of creativity—an idea which means absolutely nothing if in fact the individual does not, at least in part, act directly in setting in motion his or her own meaning. It is precisely here, in raising up the level of self-determination, that the artists of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries so distinguished the art of the present from the art of the past that an unprecedented need for an extended definition for art—modern—was required. This transference of responsibility to the individual observer to complete the work of art is the implicit meaning integral to so-called abstraction.

At the heart of this modernism is a new concept of time and determined relations as being continuous rather than incremental, inclusive rather than exclusive. Where the qualities and duration of phenomenal perception are fully extended in an interactive state of flux, never fully predictable, and never fully resolved, and *may* exist only as long as the individual perceiver keeps them in play. In this sense, practicing phenomenal perception is the equivalent of practicing in the fourth dimension.

Excerpt from “The Hidden Structures of Art,” in *Robert Irwin*, exh. cat. (Los Angeles: The Museum of Contemporary Art; New York: Rizzoli, 1993).

Robert Irwin (b. 1928, Long Beach, California; d. 2023, La Jolla, California) was a pioneering figure of the Los Angeles-based Light and Space movement of the 1960s. Beginning his career as a painter, Irwin later began exploring perception and light with his acrylic columns and discs. In 1969, he gave up his studio and began what he termed a conditional practice, working with the effects of light through subtle interventions in space and architecture. Irwin employed a wide range of media—including fluorescent lights, fabric scrims, colored and tinted gels, paint, wire, acrylic, and glass—in the creation of site-conditioned works that respond to the context of their specific environments.

1 Ad Reinhardt, “Art-as-Art” in *Art-as-Art: The Selected Writings of Ad Reinhardt*, ed. Barbara Rose (New York, Viking Press, 1975), 53.

*Robert Irwin*  
101 Spring Street  
April 4–August 31, 2024

Public hours:  
Friday–Saturday  
1:00–5:00pm

*Robert Irwin* is made possible  
with support from Pace Gallery.

### Exhibition Checklist

*“C and C” (Complex/Coherent)*, 2021  
Shadow + Reflection + Color  
72 × 111¼ × 4¼ inches  
(182.9 cm × 282.6 cm × 10.8 cm)

*AS GOOD AS IT GETS*, 2023  
Shadow + Reflection + Color  
72 × 174¾ × 48¼ inches  
(182.9 cm × 443.9 cm × 10.8 cm)

*Sculpture/Configuration 2T 3L*, 2018  
Acrylic  
119 × 36 × 32 inches  
(302.3 cm × 91.4 cm × 81.3 cm)

Judd Foundation presents *Robert Irwin*, an exhibition of three works at 101 Spring Street in New York. The exhibition extends inquiries into visual perception made by the artist in the same space more than fifty years ago.

The first exhibition of Irwin’s work at 101 Spring Street (April 24–May 29, 1971) consisted of a single acrylic column, installed in the building’s ground floor space. The work, installed by Irwin and Donald Judd with Pace Gallery, was sited to respond to light from southern and western exposures. Interested in space and human perception, Irwin and Judd both made works utilizing materials and installations that involved the surrounding architecture, challenging what was considered art. As Irwin wrote, “Like time and space, it [art] has no actual physical properties. Or infinite physical properties.”<sup>1</sup> In his introductory essay on the Chinati Foundation/La Fundación Chinati in Marfa, Texas, Judd included Irwin among the artists whose work was yet to be installed there.<sup>2</sup> In 2016, Irwin’s site-considered work *untitled (dawn to dusk)* was completed at Chinati and is the only permanent, free-standing structure conceived and designed by the artist.

1 Robert Irwin, “Notes Towards a Model,” in *Robert Irwin*, exhibition catalogue (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1977), 23–31.

2 Donald Judd, “Statement for the Chinati Foundation/La Fundación Chinati” (1987), in *Donald Judd Writings*, ed. Flavin Judd and Caitlin Murray (New York: Judd Foundation/David Zwirner Books, 2016), 488.