

AICA CONGRESS - TOKYO 1998

Monuments and Icons: New Dimensions of Public Art

The art of James Turrell, Les Levine, Jochen Gerz, Frances Hegarty  
and Danny Osborne  
Paper with slide presentation by Dorothy Walker

Public art underwent a noticeable change in the late sixties and early seventies with the revolutionary work of American land artists such as Robert Smithson, Walter de Maria, Dennis Oppenheim, Michael Heizer, and the British artists, Richard Long.

SLIDE Line in Clare by Richard Long

But while their art was out in the public domain, it remained largely inaccessible, I mean physically inaccessible, being generally in remote locations where the artists could give <sup>near</sup>rein to their ideas on a monumental scale, far from both the madding crowd and, alas, any form of public transport.

James Turrell, on the other hand, lives near Flagstaff, Arizona, and works in the local airport. (When short of money, he repairs vintage aeroplanes; I would have to say that visiting him was my first and only experience of seeing an aeroplane in an artist's studio.) His monumental project - the Roden Crater - is accessible from the road, and, apart from the danger of meeting rattlesnakes on the way up to the crater, is comparatively easy of access.

The artist has engaged a small army of workmen to help him slightly alter the rim of the extinct volcano's crater, so that when one <sup>supine</sup> lies on the edge of the crater, looking ~~back~~ up at the sky, the whole encircling form of sky and land attains a complete circular harmony.

Turrell works with light and space, and with the effects of light on space.

In this sense, his work is a straight continuation of concerns in European painting since the Renaissance, but with revolutionary simplicity influenced, as he has written\* (Air Mass, James Turrell, the South Bank Centre, London, June 1993) by being responsive to the straightforward, strict presentation of the sublime, 'which Japan seemed to offer.'. He has taken <sup>these</sup> ~~such~~ traditional concerns into the twentieth century, inspired by one of its most miraculous and accessible technological accomplishments - flying - (also one of humanity's traditional aims from earliest mythology), and, again in the simplest way, he focuses attention on the core of modern physics i.e. light. Turrell manipulates light to such an extent that he makes a void appear as a surface, as in his very beautiful installations in the Museum of Modern Art in Frankfurt and the Crawford Gallery in Cork. This is not mere technical trickery; it is, again, enhancing a traditional rectangular form of pure colour, in Frankfurt a deep extraordinary purple (which God must walk by every day) by the use of actual space and depth, in a way, the sort of result Yves Klein was seeking with his immaterial blues, or Rothko with his colour fields: colour into which one is drawn as into a space made up of colour only.

Turrell's public works in Ireland are easy to reach. The 'Air Mass' which he made for a temporary exhibition in the grounds of Kilkenny Castle in 1993 has been permanently installed in the grounds of an estate near Thomastown, Co. Kilkenny, which is open to the public on specific days. There is a similar installation with a sliding roof at PSI in Long Island City which is viewable, by appointment, <sup>at</sup> ~~by~~ sunset. (Or was, I don't know if it has been retained in the restoration of the building.) ~~They have the same basic structure: a square room with continuous seating around the four walls, and a hidden light source washing the upper walls from behind the seat back,~~



They have the same basic structure: a square room with continuous seating around the walls, except for the entrance door, and a hidden light source washing the upper walls from behind the seat back, affecting the colour of the sky as it appears in the square roof opening. The New York sky, being relatively close to both La Guardia and Kennedy airports, tended to have its concentration disturbed by approaching aeroplanes. The Kilkenny piece is magnificent, perhaps not least because of the beauty of the Irish sky, the clear air of the Irish countryside, with rather smaller, and quieter, airborne creatures. The free-standing aluminium structure becomes a cube of light in a deepening relationship with the changing light of the sky: in the beginning one is entranced with the immensity of concentrated volume traversed by homing flights of rooks, and subsequently, as the sky darkens and the light cube brightens, with the phenomenon of the volume changing to a two-dimensional surface. The artist's remarkable notion to make a structure out of thin air, to manipulate the sky, extends into the metaphysical sphere: awe becomes reality. The first time I saw this piece, I sat in the square, open-roofed room for several hours, from late daylight to pitch dark.

Turrell was also engaged in a major project in the south-west of Ireland called The Sky Garden, in which he proposed to construct five stone emplacements leading one to the other, all involved with a meditative perception of the sky. The project, however, ran into trouble with the Swiss gallery-owner who had commissioned it, and it has not been completed, although the general layout of the scheme has been constructed, plus one or two of the 'stations.' This location is also easily accessed, some two miles from the town of Skibbereen, Co Cork.

SLIDES Roden Crater, Air Mass, Sky Garden, Wedgework

Turrell's work is interesting in being out in the country, while the other work I propose to show you is very much part of the city.

# SLIDE 2,149 stones - Monument against racism

The German artist Jochen Gerz, who is based in Paris, has made an invisible 'Monument against racism' in the square of the castle of Saarbrücken in Germany, in 1993. The square is paved with 2,149 cobblestones, and over three years, Gerz and his students at the Art Academy in Saarbrücken removed the stones one by one and chiseled the name of a Jewish cemetery on the hidden side of the stone, which was then replaced. So the square became a monument to the Jewish dead, even if an invisible one. The local county council, which meets in the castle, legalized the formerly secret work, and the square has been renamed 'Square of the Invisible Monument.'

The Irish artist Les Levine, who is based in New York, is one of the pioneers of contemporary public art. While his art is generally on a monumental scale, using full-size advertising billboards, it is not in the form of permanent monuments. On the contrary, he has promulgated the idea of 'media art', appropriating the immediacy and temporary nature of advertising, and actually renting advertising space out in the public domain. His most recent major public campaign - and he calls his work series 'campaigns', as in advertising campaigns - was in the city of Stuttgart, Germany, where 200 billboards on the theme 'Art can see' were erected throughout the city. This campaign was more directly related to art; his previous campaigns have had a strong political bias, as in the 'Blame God' series in London and Dublin, or his many campaigns in the US against discrimination, in justice, consumerism etc.

SLIDES 'Art can see', 'Blame God', 'Consume or perish' etc

~~His direct, accessible imagery, linked to often~~



His direct, accessible imagery, linked to sloganistic, satirical, often ambiguous language, lifts his political messages above any mere hectoring or propaganda function into the realm of serious art out on the highways of America or the city streets of Europe, as in Documenta '87 in Kassel.

Levine also shows his work in museums, as in Stuttgart, or the major retrospectives at the Elverson Museum, Gateshead in England, New York, or the Irish Museum of Modern Art in Dublin.

Sponsorship. While most art sponsors wish to have their names immortalized in permanent monuments, presumably to get their public relations money's worth, a really interesting new programme was inaugurated last year in Dublin by the Japanese car manufacturer Nissan, in association with the Irish Museum of Modern Art, to sponsor temporary works in the public domain. It is an international competition judged by an Irish and international jury. In 1997, the competition, which attracted over 90 entries from all over the world, was won by the Irish artist Frances Hegarty and her partner Andrew Stone, who work in video and electronic media.

#### SLIDES 'For Dublin'

Her project 'For Dublin' consisted of short excerpts from Molly Bloom's monologue at the conclusion of James Joyce's novel 'Ulysses', in shocking-pink neon fixed to various buildings and locations in the city to which they related, e.g. over the portico of the City Hall: 'wouldn't it be better for the world to be governed by the women in it?' or, while sitting in a traffic jam, one could ponder the sentence on the walls of Trinity College, Dublin University: 'Isn't it great to be able to talk to an intelligent man'. There were nine locations throughout the city centre, two on the quay walls above the waters of the River Liffey which runs through the city.

(The Liffey is a central motif in 'Finnegans Wake': Anna Livia Plurabelle.)

This year, 1998, twenty-six artists were invited to submit proposals from which four artists have been short-listed: Marie Jose Burki (Switzerland) who has proposed a video and sound work designed to increase people's awareness of the passage of time; Dorothy Cross (Ireland) who proposes the creation of a 'ghost ship' at the mouth of the Liffey where it enters Dublin Bay - the decommissioned lightship would be covered in luminous paint to glow and fade with the changing light; Joao Penalva (Portugal) whose proposal would involve billboards, flyers, advertisement and other media through which a single word would be so omnipresent throughout the city that people could not fail to see, hear and discuss it - influence of Les Levine? Finally the Laotian artist Vong Phaophanit has proposed the creation of a space at a recognized point of urban activity, architecture and population of the city in which the viewer's aural sense would be completely suspended, *while enclosed in a room with thick glass windows blotting out the sound.* The winner will be selected in May and the winning work realized in September, hopefully in time for the AICA Congress.

Finally, to an actual iconic image in the form of a permanent public monument to the Irish writer, poet, playwright Oscar Wilde, situated in Merrion Square opposite the house where he grew up, in the heart of eighteenth century Dublin. The work is by the Co. Cork -based sculptor and explorer Danny Osborne, who was initially trained as a porcelain-maker of figurines for Wedgwood. 'Oscar Wilde' is his first life-size work, the commission for which he won in an open competition sponsored by Guinness Ireland.



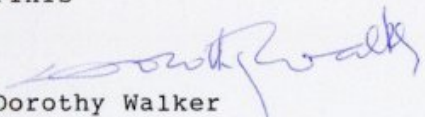
The life-size (6ft 3") figure is made of polychrome stone, the first such since the Renaissance. His jacket is <sup>green</sup>solid jade, with lapels and cuffs of soft pink Thulite marble and <sup>patina'd</sup>bronze frog fastenings; his trousers are Blue Pearl granite, his shoes and socks black Indian granite. The wonderful jade, in particular, one of the largest blocks in the world, seems entirely appropriate to Wilde. The figure reclines indolently on a massive white quartz rock, looking across at two polished plinths which bear bronze figures of the dramatist's pregnant wife Constance on one and the torso of Dionysius on the other, representing Life and Art. Artists, writers, singers, and public figures were invited by the artist to select a favourite quotation from Wilde - probably the world's most quoted playwright after Shakespeare - and to send it to him in their own handwriting. These ranged from 'Lying, the telling of beautiful untrue things, is the proper aim of art' to 'I find it harder and harder every day to live up to my blue china.' He then had these hand-written quotations transposed and sand-blasted into the surface of the plinths, so that these are covered all over with 'graffiti' from Wilde, including a previously unpublished one in Wilde's own hand-writing, thereby also getting in ahead of the graffiti enthusiasts of the public.

Osborne went to extraordinary lengths to complete this monument which took some two years to carve and assemble. He got in touch with Merlin Holland, Wilde's grandson, to pose for his grandfather's head - he resembles photographs of Wilde. He searched libraries all over the world to find a quotation in Wilde's hand-writing; he travelled to Alaska and Norway to find the jade and the Thulite marble, and devised complex calipers for measuring, cutting and carving the fourteen different stone components of the statue.

Many years ago, I remember Clement Greenberg casting his biting sarcasm on the makers of 'statuary', but this post-modernist piece of statuary, entirely in keeping with the spirit of Oscar Wilde, would, I think, stand up to even his derision. The statue was unveiled in October 1997.

SLIDES 'Oscar Wilde'

Finis



Dorothy Walker

Dublin, 7 April 1998