



Art Review: James Turrell and Trying Conditions at the Guggenheim

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by Pac Pobric

Being a journalist or art critic in New York City comes with certain privileges, especially when it comes to looking at actual artwork in museums. Invitations to media previews or private viewings offer rare opportunities to see art in peace and quiet, or even with a knowledgeable guide. With the museum usually closed to the public for the occasion, the crowds are small, including only other editors and writers. It's easy to pace yourself and look as long or as little as you like and there is no obligation to rush or slow down through anything. Even when the art is bad (more often than not), the experience can still be a pleasurable one or at least allow for a certainty of reflection: the fewer the distractions, the clearer the judgment.

It may have been a mistake, then, to not attend the media preview for James Turrell's exhibition at the Guggenheim and, instead, to see the show on a busy Saturday afternoon with hundreds of other visitors. Because the exhibition is one of the city's big summer blockbusters, it will draw in more crowds than usual and that was certainly the case during my visit.

Along with the line to get into the museum, there was a line to get tickets, a line to see at least one of the galleries, and a line (quite unfortunately) to leave. It's a poor first impression for any exhibition and especially for one of Turrell's work, which relies far more heavily on context than the work of other important artists. But this impression is doubtless the one most museum attendees will have, and it makes enjoying the art nearly impossible.

That said, the show's centerpiece, *Aten Reign* (2013), which was designed specifically for the space, is quite impressive. Turrell has taken the gallery's signature concentric circles and built around them a series of shallow spaces emitting light. The color gradation changes from one layer to the next, and the overall color composition of the light changes slowly over the course of several minutes.

It's the kind of piece that could have been a pleasure to enjoy in solitude but with hundreds of other visitors chatting away, with no comfortable place from which to view the work for an extended period, and with frequent yelling from frustrated museum guards ("no photography!"), the work was virtually impossible to see. And this was the show's high point.



"Aten Reign" by James Turrell, 2013. Daylight and LED light, dimensions variable. © James Turrell. Installation view: "James Turrell," Solomon R.

Guggenheim Museum, New York, June 21 – September 25, 2013. Photo:
David Heald © Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, New York.

Other works, including four earlier light pieces and a series of prints, were weaker, partly because they had no force in relation to the overwhelming scale of *Aten Reign. Ronin* (1968), a florescent light-bulb piece, along with *Afrum I (White)* and *Prado*, projector works from 1967, all employ the use of white light, which today looks bland and uninspired, though it's possible to imagine that this may not have always been the case.



“Prado (White)” by James Turrell, 1967. Projected light,
dimensions variable.

Collection of Kyung-Lim Lee Turrell. © James Turrell. Photo:
Florian Holzherr.

Unwittingly, the entire experience raises political questions having to do with what kind of an environment is ideal for the experience of art. Democratic access to institutions like the Guggenheim is a noble goal, but democracy can be oppressive as well. Perhaps there is a connection between art like Turrell's, with its popular appeal, and the fact that the work ultimately relies on space that is dictated to it.



“Ronin” by James Turrell, 1968. Fluorescent light,
dimensions variable. Collection of the artist. © James
Turrell. Installation view: Jim Turrell, Stedelijk Museum,
Amsterdam, April 9–May 23, 1976. Photo: Courtesy the
Stedelijk Museum.

Installation artists have always argued that their work is about transforming a space from one thing into another, but, in the end, the art still relies on what is given to it in order to succeed. Great art, however, rarely relies so heavily on context and an excellent painting will look good regardless of

where it's shown.

Another of the Guggenheim's current shows, "New Harmony: Abstraction Between the Wars, 1919-1939," proves that point nicely: tucked away in a round section of the wall, sandwiched between a pillar, a stairwell, and a balcony, was a brilliant Arp construction which demanded attention despite its poor placement. Turrell's work, on the other hand, may ask too much of its environment, and the demands it places on space and quiet may be too heavy a burden to bear.

There are excellent ways to see Turrell and the work can be brilliant when it is afforded a certain set of circumstances, as with a piece like *Meeting* (1986) at MoMA P.S. 1. But that strength is not present at the Guggenheim show and that's the end result of an art that is too tied to environment. If the work fails, it ultimately does so on its own.

BASIC FACTS: "James Turrell" remains on view through Sept 25, 2013. The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum is located at 1071 5th Ave. New York, NY 10128. www.guggenheim.org.

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