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ARCHITECTURAL LIGHTING

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• DESIGN

CRITIQUE

LIGHT ART MATTERS

A closer look at the ideas behind the work.

text by Glenn Shrum

In 1969, as part of an experimental program at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Robert Irwin and James Turrell outlined a new direction for art, identifying viewer experience as the critical outcome of an artist's creative production and establishing viewers' visual perception of the environment as a principal concern. For Irwin and Turrell, light was the primary medium for investigating these ideas.

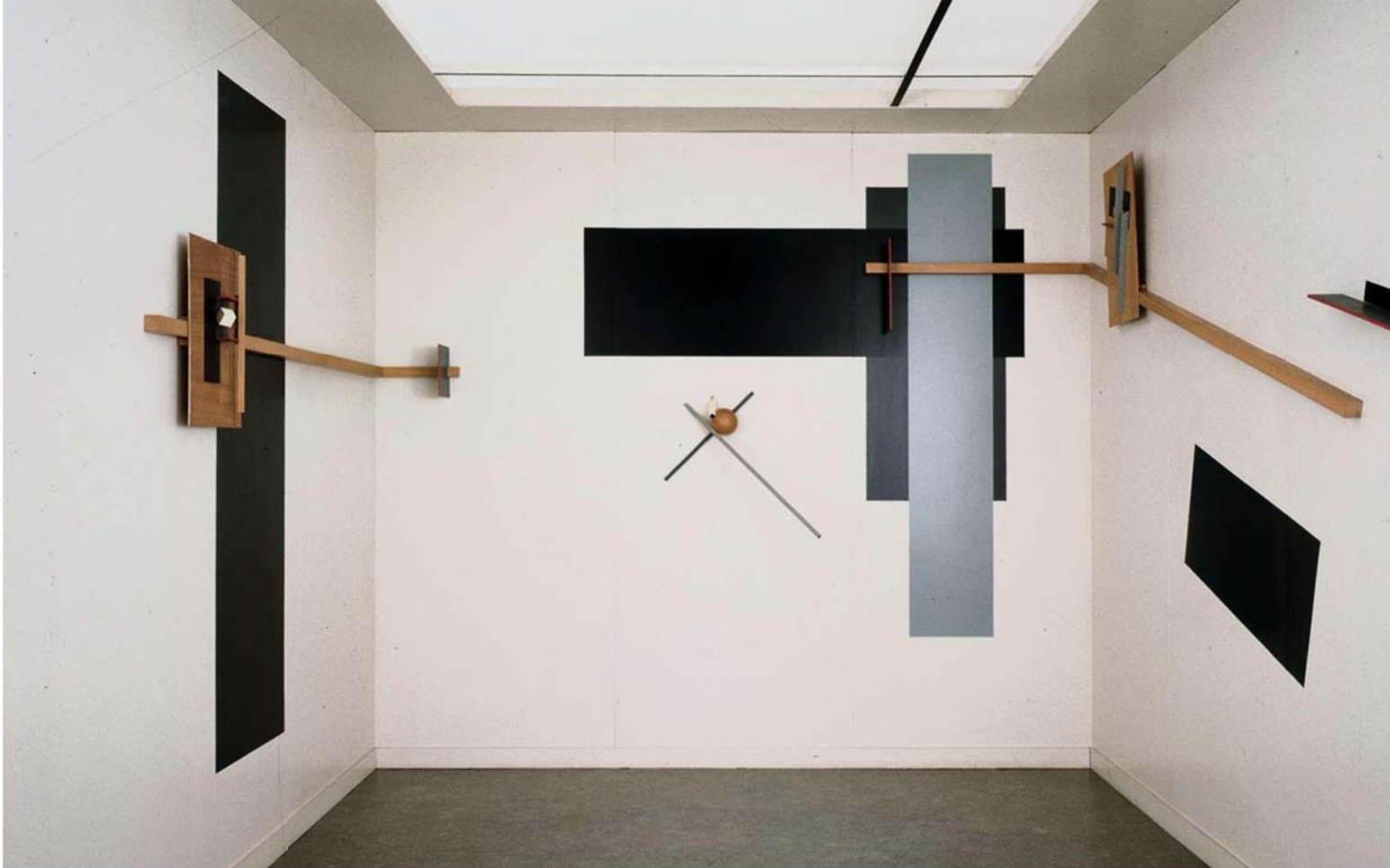
Artists have long used light, but, thanks in large part to the pioneering work of Irwin and Turrell, the dedicated field of light art emerged in the late 20th century. Light artists create environments specifically to explore the

perception and experience of light itself and to change the way people perceive their everyday visual environment.

To better understand light art's influence on architectural lighting design, it is important to consider the two different approaches that light artists take to affect viewers' experience and perception. Some artists, such as the late Dan Flavin, place familiar lighting conditions in a new context, while others, such as Turrell, create unfamiliar environments in order to induce heightened perceptual awareness. An artist's choice to conceal or reveal lighting systems therefore has a considerable influence.

Line Describing a Cone, Anthony McCall, 1973

By displaying the 16mm projector along with the projected image, artist Anthony McCall invites viewers of his avant-garde film *Line Describing a Cone*, to turn their backs on the screen and consider the phenomena of light found in the typical cinema environment.



Environments that require the viewer to fully immerse themselves in a space are very different from the lighting conditions we typically experience. With such installations, artists often limit sensory stimuli, leaving themselves free to manipulate the viewer's perception of a few remaining lighting elements. This kind of enigmatic experience is less likely to occur when lighting systems remain visible. By hiding devices such as light fixtures, daylight apertures, reflectors, and screens, the artist can focus an observer's attention on the illusory characteristics of light.

In contrast, light artists such as Turrell and more recently Olafur Eliasson endeavor to intensify the perceptual field without

completely removing viewers from everyday conditions. By exposing the mechanics of the artwork, as Flavin famously did with fluorescent lamps, the artist can lead viewers into an analytical frame of mind by allowing them to consider lighting effects alongside the devices and techniques that create them.

While architectural lighting design and light art share an interest in their exploration of space, experience, and perception, the issues associated with budget, life safety, energy use, maintenance, and coordination with other design and engineering disciplines often become the focus of attention on architectural lighting projects. Unleashed from these restrictions, light artists have developed a

body of work and a range of approaches to viewer experience and visual perception of the environment that provides the architectural lighting design community with a valuable reference point for examining these issues in their own projects. •

Glenn Shrum, a new ARCHITECTURAL LIGHTING contributor, is founder and principal of Flux Studio, which is based in Baltimore, Md. He is the U.S. coordinator of the Professional Lighting Designers' Association and a part-time faculty member at the lighting program at Parsons, The New School for Design, School of Constructed Environments in New York City.

The Origins of Light Art

In 1966, Maurice Tuchman, curator of modern art at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art in Los Angeles, conceived of the Art and Technology Program. The goal of the program, which ran from 1967 to 1971, was to promote an exchange between artists and corporations. Robert Irwin and James Turrell were teamed with psychologist Edward Wortz of Garrett AIResearch, an aerospace manufacturer; their collaboration focused on perception conditioning and included a series of sensory-deprivation experiments conducted in the anechoic chamber at the University of California, Los Angeles. One lasting outcome is a rare 387-page catalog, A Report on the Art and Technology Program of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1967–1971 (left). Another is the ongoing exploration of art, light, technology, and perception known as light art.

Previous page: Courtesy Sean Kelly Gallery, New York; Left to right: The Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation; Courtesy Van Abbemuseum Museum; Courtesy Hirshhorn Museum



Above left: *Prounenraum* (proun room), El Lissitzky, 1923 (reconstruction 1971)

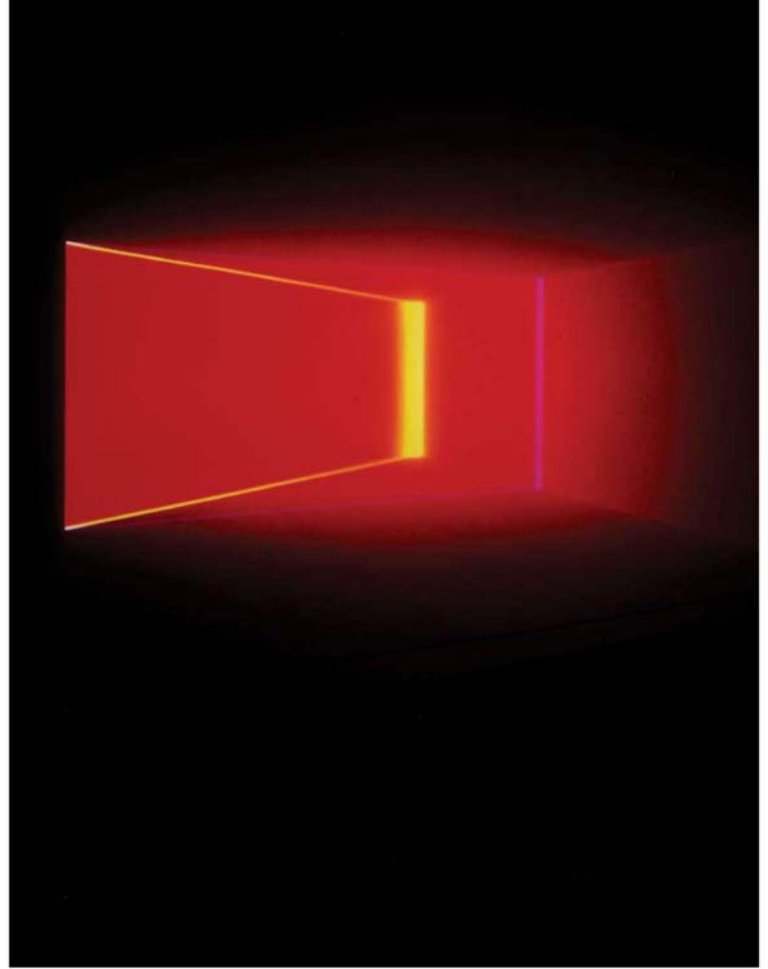
El Lissitzky's *Prounenraum* (proun room) is considered by many art historians to be the first time an artist incorporated architectural lighting elements as a component that is integral to his work.

Above: *Untitled (to Tracy, to celebrate the love of a lifetime)*, Dan Flavin, 1992

Flavin asserted that we should look more closely at the objects and lighting conditions that surround us every day. His work adheres to this principle by the exclusive use of low-tech, off-the-shelf lighting equipment.

Above right: *Milk Run*, James Turrell, 1996

Many of Turrell's works, including this one, are fully comprehensible only after the observer's eyes have adjusted to low light levels. This period of perceptual adaptation reinforces the disconnect that these visually experiential artworks have from everyday lighting conditions.



Current Debate • Is it art or is it lighting? *The Art Newspaper* has reported that the European Commission has reversed a U.K. tax ruling classifying works by Dan Flavin and Bill Viola as "art." Instead, the pieces are considered electrical devices and are subject to a 20 percent value-added tax, instead of 5 percent. This has caused an uproar in the art world and could seriously limit the import and export of works that use light as a medium. See *The Art Newspaper* article at bit.ly/fgAekc.