

# **Proceedings of the European Society for Aesthetics**

Volume 11, 2019

Edited by Connell Vaughan and Iris Vidmar Jovanović

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## ***To Be a Bat: Can Art Objectify the Subjective?***

Ronald Shusterman<sup>1</sup>

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ABSTRACT. My goal here will be to observe the way art may claim to capture, represent, and indeed transmit subjectivity. I argue, following Bertrand Russell, that it is *knowledge by acquaintance* that is at the heart of subjectivity. To answer the question raised by the title of this paper, I will examine the potentialities and the limits of works of art that attempt to show us “what it is like” to experience something – works that strive to objectify the subjective. Can art really capture all of the depth of our affects and our qualia? Is it capable not only of shaping our subjectivity but of transmitting to us the subjectivity of the artist? Exploring these issues will involve returning to the Mind-Body problem and to the work of Thomas Nagel and Rosalind Krauss.

### **To Marguerite: Continued**

Yes! in the sea of life enisled,  
With echoing straits between us thrown,  
Dotting the shoreless watery wild,  
We mortal millions live *alone*.  
– Matthew Arnold, 1852, 1857.

Is the visual image automatically a source of knowledge? Can it capture and

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transmit all sorts of cognitive information? In *Echo Objects : The Cognitive Work of Images* (2007), Barbara Maria Stafford offers a radical answer to these questions. She argues that the visual image inherently embodies a sort of objectivity and cognition that goes far beyond everyday concerns. Indeed, she claims that basic geometrical shapes remind us of the creation of the solar system and of the total history of our species:

Upward or downward-inclined lines, upright or inverted isosceles triangles, circles, and squares schematize the sublimated violent tale of the formation of the solar system and suppressed recollection of the battle-to-the-death for the survival of the fittest.<sup>2</sup>

Here seeing is not only perceiving, it amounts to grasping via an image the fundamental and objective truth of our ontology and metaphysics.

This kind of radical claim for the objectivity of the visual often goes hand in hand with a certain determinism. On this point, Stafford concurs with many other theorists who see art as an activity over-determined by natural selection and/or our neurological make-up.<sup>3</sup> Yet if this determinism

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<sup>2</sup> Stafford, Barbara Maria, *Echo Objects: The Cognitive Work of Images*, Chicago, U of Chicago P, 2007, p. 31.

<sup>3</sup> On this point, see Shusterman, Ronald, « Effet immédiat, satisfait ou remboursé : les impasses du déterminisme matérialiste en art, » Pau, PUP, 2014, pp. 53-61 ; “Aesthetic Effects and Determinism,” *Proceedings of the European Society for Aesthetics*, Vol. 3, 2011, pp. 267-280; « Atavisme et animalité : la nouvelle esthétique matérialiste anglo-saxonne », in *Animal / Humain : passages, Figures de l'art* 27, 2014, pp. 33-45.

is consciously endorsed by many theorists, there are also visual artists who seem to adopt, consciously or unconsciously, a similar position. I intend to examine how the visual image might be a vector of knowledge by discussing the question of subjectivity. If the image is in some way inherently cognitive, then perhaps it may indeed transmit both the visible and the invisible. If visual art is in some way a source of fundamental knowledge, then it should be able to objectify the subjective.

Obviously, one could spend hours defining in detail the notions of objectivity and cognition, notions that have been rejected or reworked in various ways by various movements in poststructuralism, postmodernism, deconstruction, pragmatism, and so on. One would also have to spend time working out the boundaries of the visual image in its relations to the theory and practice of art. Such endeavours are beyond the scope of this short paper, but I would like to recall the distinction, established long ago by Bertrand Russell, between *knowledge by description* and *knowledge by acquaintance*. Knowledge by description is propositional knowledge based on reasoning, logic, and the workings of the language used to express the information involved. If I'm told that the Tower of London is in London, I can infer that it is in England. On the other hand, I cannot know what it is like to be imprisoned there unless I undergo the experience. Only this direct contact can provide the sensory data, the affects – all of the subjective phenomena philosophers sometimes call *qualia* – that being shut up in the Tower of London entails.

Knowledge by acquaintance is thus at the heart of subjectivity. To answer the question raised by the title of this paper, I will examine the range and power of art that seeks some kind of sensorial objectivity. This investigation is only indirectly related to the question of the propositional knowledge that may or may not be transmitted by figurative or narrative art. No doubt the analysis of the “truth” of figurative painting will be roughly analogous to the analysis of the relation between literary fiction and reality. My interest here, however, is the extent to which visual art, representational or not, can embody all of the wealth and particularity of our sensorial existence. Clearly a work of art modifies the spectator’s subjectivity, but the question becomes: can it produce in the spectator some kind of correspondence to the qualia the artist experienced during the conception and the production of the work. This, after all, was the idea behind the theory of the “objective correlative” formulated by T.S. Eliot back in 1921:

The only way of expressing emotion in the form of art is by finding an “objective correlative”; in other words, a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that *particular* emotion; such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked.<sup>4</sup>

If the artist externalizes his interiority via the objective correlative, it might

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<sup>4</sup> See Eliot, T.S., “Hamlet and his Problems,” in *The Sacred Wood*, New York, Knopf, 1921, p. 92.

be hoped that the spectator could reach an analogous state via his contemplation of the work.

We might add that this notion of an objective correlative is not far from the Joycean concept of the *epiphany*. And to move from the sublime to what may be considered the ridiculous by some, we could argue that Tracey Emin's *My Bed* (1998) is clearly the objective correlative of her inner life.



**Figure 1:** Tracy Emin, *My Bed* (1998)

The art of self-expression, be it confession or braggartry, is indeed both objective and subjective. But it remains to be seen whether or not such objective correlatives can become the source of truly analogous qualia or corresponding emotion for the spectator. Can the artist really *objectify* her subjectivity?

Those of you who have recognized the allusion to Thomas Nagel in my title have probably guessed that my answer is going to be essentially

negative. In “What is it like to be a Bat”, Nagel questions the possibility of a transfer of subjectivities between different species, concluding that the only way to know what it is like to be a bat is to be one.<sup>5</sup> Nagel’s approach provides the foundations of my analysis, but before I come back to it, I should like to examine how several artists *imagine* the subjectivity and alterity of different species.

We can start with Damien Hirst and Jan Fabre. One could say a lot about Hirst’s relation to the animal world, but here, for example, is his rendition of a chiroptera:



**Figure 2:** Damien Hirst, *Caroliae perspicillatae* (2014)

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<sup>5</sup> See *The Philosophical Review*, Vol. 83, No. 4. (Oct., 1974), pp. 435-450.

And here is what Fabre has to offer:



**Figure 3:** Jan Fabre, *Ik heb vannacht een vleermuis gezien in het Peerdsbos* (1986)

While both works can indeed tell us what it is like to *see* a bat, neither is going to help us experience the qualia involved in *being* one.

One amusing attempt to embody hybridity and interspecific subjectivity can be found in the following self-portrait by Fabre, something that might have been called “*What it’s like to be a worm*”:



**Figure 4:** Jan Fabre, *Autoportrait en plus grand ver du monde* (2008)

Once again, whatever we might think of this work, it seems clear that it fails to provoke in us the qualia of a worm. Nor is it likely that Fabre in some way experienced worminess himself at the moment of its conception. Wittgenstein made the point long ago: “If a lion could speak, we could not understand him.”<sup>6</sup> Nagel adds that in order to feel the subjectivity of a bat, it is not enough to imagine how it would affect *me* to fly in the dark, use ultrasound to navigate, or to hang upside down from a branch:

Insofar as I can imagine this (which is not very far) it tells me only what it would be like for *me* to behave as a bat behaves. But that is not the question. I want to know what it is like for a *bat* to be a bat. I am

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<sup>6</sup> Wittgenstein, Ludwig *Philosophical Investigations*, Oxford, Blackwell, 1986, p. 226.

restricted to the resources of my own mind and those resources are inadequate to the task.<sup>7</sup>

There have also been various literary efforts to capture interspecific qualia – one recent French novel by an art critic involves the author imagining himself as a bird<sup>8</sup> – but *imagining* foreign qualia isn't the same as actually experiencing them, and the connection between a literary text and sensation is going to be even more problematic.

Yet it must be admitted that in other contexts the visual image does provide a sort of objective knowledge, in some flexible sense of the term. One might establish a rough typology of the objectivity of images, distinguishing between:

1. Objectivity via contact or impression: Here the information transmitted via the visual image is «true» in the sense of being produced by a causal relation. One could count Muybridge's form of chronophotography as an example of this: the camera objectively captures light in a way that gives us knowledge about the movements of a horse.

2. Perceptual Objectivity: Despite what I have said about the impossibility of transmitting the artist's subjectivity to the spectator, it would be foolish to deny that the work of art provokes certain inevitable perceptual responses. I don't *choose* to see an Yves Klein monochrome as

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<sup>7</sup> Nagel, Thomas, *Mortal Questions*, Cambridge, CUP, 1979; Canto, 1991, p. 169.

<sup>8</sup> See Ardenne, Paul, *Comment je suis oiseau*, Paris, Passage, 2014.

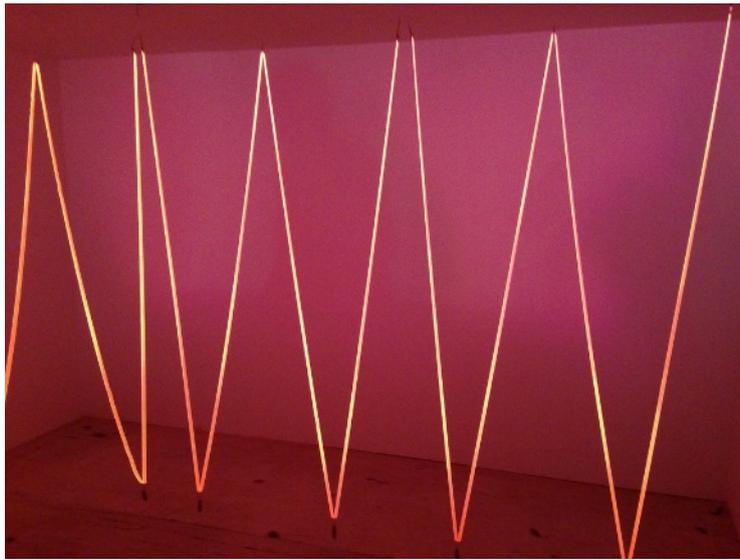
blue; this is a given, and to that extent one might speak of the “objectivity” of this percept.

3. Propositional Objectivity: In this case, one might speak of the “objectivity” or of the “truthfulness” of the image’s narrative or factual content, a content that needs to be corroborated by other sources of cognition, whatever their status may be. This corroboration may of course be problematic and debatable, to the extent that my recognition (for example) of a portrait of Napoleon depends on no actual knowledge of him, but on my contact with other portraits that I deem authentic.

I’ve put “scare quotes” around the various usages of the term “objectivity” here as there is obviously some slippage in the senses being used in these differing contexts. But since the topic is the relation of the visual image to questions of knowledge and truth, it seemed useful to make these brief remarks.

We can see that categories 1 and 3 involve both knowledge by description and knowledge by acquaintance. When I examine the image of the galloping horse, I combine the perceptual experience of visual data with the logical analysis of propositional information. My second category, on the other hand, only involves percepts, with no propositional content other than the knowledge that this particular image produces this particular percept. It is thus this second category that interests me here.

I would like to pursue the question by examining the following work presented in Paris in 2012:



**Figure 5:** Jan Van Munster, *Warmte* (1983, 2012)

It would be imprudent to limit this work to one dimension only, but I would like to argue that the visual is not really what matters most here. Perceptually, the dominant feature is the extreme heat one feels as one approaches the incandescent lines. We can say that this heat is an objective quality of the work, and also note that the work isn't giving us an *image* of heat – it is actually producing it automatically for any spectator who is sufficiently nearby.

Of course, the term “image” is a slippery as “objectivity”. Some theorists limit it to its representational sense – an image is always an image *of* something. Others extend the term to make it synonymous with “sense

data” – this is the kind of usage that enables one to speak of “auditory images”. And here I would indeed like to turn to music, since the following example will help us perceive the limits of certain fashions in art theory today.

Anthony Braxton is an intellectual jazz musician, a specialist of free jazz who was influenced by John Cage. Back in 1975, I bought his album, *Five Pieces*, for his absolutely sublime version of a jazz standard, *You Stepped Out of a Dream* – the first track on the album. The other 4 tracks had the following titles:

"G - 647 (BNK - [ ])"

"4038 -- NBS 373 6"

"489 M 70 - 2 -- (TH - B) M"

"BOR - - - - H - S N - K64 (60) - - M"

At this point in his career, Braxton had abandoned titles in English, replacing them with symbols or graphs such as these:

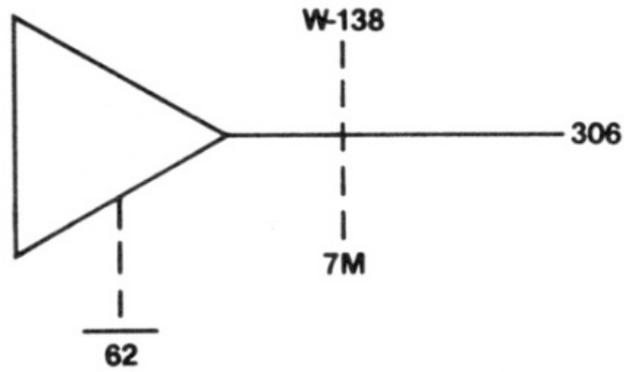


Figure 6.

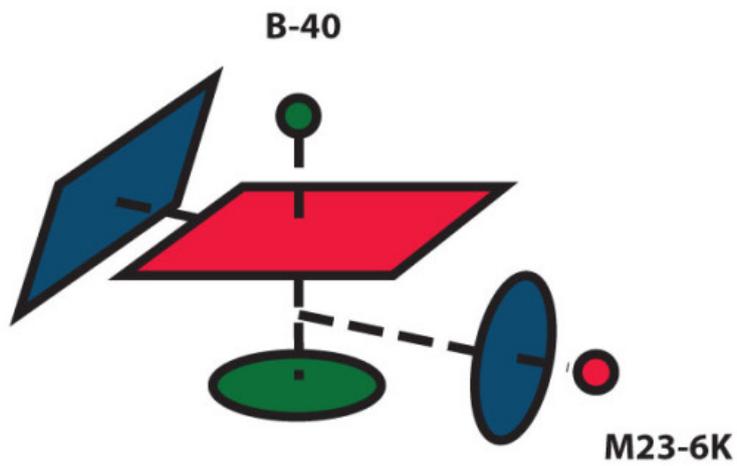


Figure 7.

Here is what one online jazz encyclopaedia observes:

Braxton eschewed conventional titles for his compositions, and instead identified each with a diagram consisting of a few lines and letters, some resembling circuit diagrams. Braxton later added sequential numbers to the diagrams, making it easier to track his expanding bodies of work, but the compositions themselves were still hard to define.<sup>9</sup>

Theoretically, this seems to be some kind of visual notation of the musical score, but it is not at all clear how such a notation would work. Does the drawing really represent the music? Perhaps for Braxton himself there is some obvious connection between the diagrams and the music, but can the rest of us make the same claim?

I would like to argue that the Braxton example teaches us two lessons. First of all, we can see the limits of all the “transaesthetic relations” that have become so popular in university studies over the last 20 years or so. One cannot simply affirm peremptorily some fundamental connection between image and sound or image and text for there really to be some mystical relation between them all. This might help us reject some of the radical claims of people like W.J.T. Mitchell for whom there is, in the final analysis, no difference between a text an image, for whom “...there is no *essential* difference between poetry and painting, no difference, that is, that

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<sup>9</sup> See <http://www.jazz.com/encyclopedia/braxton-anthony>

is given for all time by the inherent natures of the media, the objects they represent, or the laws of the human mind.”<sup>10</sup> Secondly (but perhaps it is really the same idea), the arbitrariness of the sign and the ultimate incommensurability of our different senses erect an insurmountable barrier to any attempt to achieve a total transmission of subjectivity and a total erasure of the boundaries between the arts. The images provided by Braxton do not capture the music, they do not allow us to *see* it, nor even to *hear* it, no matter how we try.

But perhaps we could find some more positive examples of how art might provide a kind of objectivity by controlling the spectator’s subjectivity while at the same time providing some sort of knowledge. James Turrell’s *Roden Crater* is a site conceived for the contemplation of the cosmos. It controls our qualia for cognitive purposes. To place yourself in a particular position at a particular moment in the history of time is to observe some predetermined celestial phenomenon. Turrell himself underlines the objectivity of the visual experience that is produced:

*Roden Crater* has knowledge in it and it does something with that knowledge. Environmental events occur, a space lights up. Something happens in there for a moment, or for a time. It is an eye, something

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<sup>10</sup> See Mitchell, W.J.T., *Iconology. Image, Text, Ideology*, Chicago, U of Chicago P, 1986, p. 49.

that is itself perceiving. It is a piece that does not end [...] When you're there, it has visions, qualities, and a universe of possibilities.<sup>11</sup>

We could also mention Olafur Eliasson in this context. His explicit goal is not to get us to contemplate the cosmos, but to observe our own sensory mechanisms. As we know, his oft-repeated slogan – “to see yourself sensing” – is exemplified in works of art that plunge us into sensory environments where our subjectivity is overwhelmed. To take just one example, here is *Your Spiral View* (2002):



**Figure 6:** Eliasson, *Your Spiral View* (2002)

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<sup>11</sup> See Turrell quoted in Bright, Richard, *James Turrell – Eclipse*, Ostfildern, Hatje Cantz /Michael Hue-Williams, 1999, p. 21.

Eliasson does things with colour as well, and we can find the same approach in earlier works by Carlos Cruz-Diaz, an artist interested in controlling subjectivity by “disrupting retinal activity”.<sup>12</sup> I will return later to the question of *why* artists might want to deconstruct our perceptions and sensations, but right now the obvious point is that they can indeed do so, as long as we are willing to experience their work.

But this obvious point is *not* an answer to the question initially raised. For art to objectify subjectivity, for art to provide total knowledge, it would have to do more than simply objectify the affects and percepts of the creator, more than simply modulate our own. For their to be some sort of objective knowledge of subjectivity, the affects and percepts on both sides of the exchange would have to be identical. And this brings me back to Matthew Arnold:

**To Marguerite: Continued**

Yes! in the sea of life enisled,  
With echoing straits between us thrown,  
Dotting the shoreless watery wild,  
We mortal millions live alone.  
– Matthew Arnold, 1852, 1857

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<sup>12</sup> See the official webpage of the artist : <http://www.cruz-diez.com/work/chromosaturation/>.

Alas, not only can we never know what it is like to be a bat, we can never fully know what it is like to be another human being.

Ultimately, the whole question of objectifying subjectivity is linked to that perennial question in philosophy, the mind-body problem. The American artist Robert Morris playfully alluded to this problem in a series of works that also inspired an important essay by Rosalind Krauss. In “The Mind/Body Problem : Robert Morris in Series,”<sup>13</sup> Krauss connects Morris to what she sees as the hopeless dualism at the heart of Nagel’s approach. For Krauss, a work such as *Box with the Sound of Its Own Making* (1961) underlines both mind-body dualism and the distinction between inside and out:

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<sup>13</sup> Krauss, Rosalind, “The Mind/Body Problem”, in KRENS, Thomas et al., *Robert Morris. The Mind/Body Problem*, New York, Guggenheim, 1994, pp. 2-17.



**Figure 7:** Morris, *Box with the Sound of Its Own Making* (1961)

In the same way that a human cranium contains, in a sense, both the physical brain and the nonmaterial memory, this box contains an immaterial trace of its production – a tape recording to which we have no access – and this trace is, in a sense, its own memory:

...the box seems to confront the viewer from the other side of that divide that separates the object from subject: ‘What is it like,’ it seems to say, ‘to be a box?’” (4)

For Krauss, works such as *Box* or *Card File* (1962) eliminate dualism by transcending it, by making so-called private states visible and public. Here is *Card File*:



**Figure 8:** Krauss, *Card File* (1962)

And here is Krauss's conclusion:

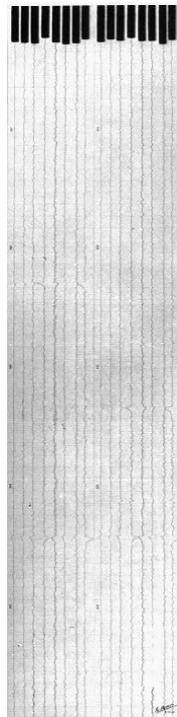
To reduce the “mental” to “language” is to transform the presumed privacy of thinking into the public medium of speech and the logic of propositions. It is as well to exchange the mysterious domain of what can be known only to the knower for the overt space of shared events.  
(4)

For Krauss, the logical positivism of A.J. Ayer established long ago that the mind/body distinction was simply nonsense since consciousness and sense data can be translated into propositions, propositions that can be made public in the same way that Morris provides public access to his card file. Krauss calls Nagel a “postbehaviourist neodualist” (p.3) and claims that Morris manages to transcend this dualism.

I don't think that mind-body dualism can be erased by simply translating sense-data into propositions. Indeed, the very term “translating” implies that *there is something different there to translate*. For Krauss, Nagel is saying “that there are two different types of *substances* in the world, the physical and the mental” (p.3) but Nagel never speaks of “mental substances”, and offhand I don't know of any contemporary philosopher who does. The mind/body problem is not a debate about propositions. It concerns the link between the thoughts and qualia experienced by a subject and the physical body that is in some way the seat of these experiences.

For Krauss, Morris manages to externalize inner experience in order to defeat dualism. The best example of this is *Self-Portrait (EEG)* (1963), a

work where Morris recorded his electroencephalogram while he was thinking of himself:



**Figure 9:** Morris *Self-Portrait (EEG)* (1963)

The EEG lasted long enough for the lines to correspond to Morris's actual height, so it is indeed a self-portrait, in a sense. Krauss concludes that Morris manages here "to transform the density of the body and the complexity of the mind into a linear trace" (p. 12); the artist thus shows us "what [it is] like to be a brain" (p.3).

Krauss's style in this article is rather allusive and mysterious at times, and perhaps I am being unfair to her arguments. But she does seem to be using Morris to defend a radical form of behaviourism and to convince us to abandon the entire concept of inner life in favour of a public and visible existence that could be considered either fully objective and objectified, or at least sufficiently *intersubjective* to count as truth.

However, one could draw totally opposite conclusions from these works by Morris. One could argue, for example, that the *Box* underlines what we humans have and what it does not: actual qualia and a rich and infinite inner life. One could argue that *Self-Portrait (EEG)* teaches us that no visual image or physical manifestation can actually give us the *content* of subjectivity, even if it may in some way be the trace of this subjectivity. For Morris's EEG is to his own mental life what Braxton's odd titles are to his music: they pretend to be signs, but they cannot really represent consciousness, cannot really transmit inner subjectivity.

Of course, artists always try to do what cannot be done, and there have been many attempts to imagine what it is like to be a brain. Here is *Wonderland* (2013), a monumental work in the centre of Calgary:



**Figure 10:** Jaume Plensa, *Wonderland* (2013)

A portal allows the visitor to enter Alice's head, and once inside I do indeed see the world through her eyes:



**Figure 11.**

But, alas, I remain the one doing the seeing, I can never be Alice, nor more than I can ever be a bat.

In the final analysis, the visual image can indeed give us knowledge by description of an object or event. It can give us knowledge by acquaintance of various sorts of percepts. What it cannot provide is direct

access to the internal qualia of another human being. *We mortal millions live alone.*

Yet we still can wonder why so many artists attempt nonetheless to transmit their subjectivity, why they try to determine our own, why they seek to transform art into some sort of total communion. Even if there is no chance of success, art seems to aspire to the condition of objectivity and total exchange. For example, there is at times a quasi-mystical dimension in the approach of James Turrell, something that is visible in quotations such as this:

I am interested in a place where the imaginative seeing and the seeing of the external world meet, where it is difficult to distinguish the seeing from within from the seeing from without.<sup>14</sup>

Turrell also evokes the idea of a “Simultaneous Dreamer” – a being capable of experiencing “the Infinite Simultaneous Dream, when multiple points of consciousness can observe different perspectives at the same time.” (p. 48, note 17). Can this be done? Can this exist? Can art objectify inner life in order to achieve communion? I think not. But artistic dreams will never be thwarted by this sad truth.

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<sup>14</sup> James Turrell quoted in Govan, Michael & Kim, Christine Y., *James Turrell: A Retrospective*, LACMA / Delmonico / Prestel, Munich, London, New York, 2013, p. 95.

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