JAMES TURRELL'S *MENDOTA STOPPAGES* AND RODEN CRATER: WHEN THE STUDIO AND THE ART BECOME ONE

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Beginning in 1966 with the seminal piece *Afrum-Proto,* which used quartz halogen projection to cause a seemingly 3-dimensional cube to appear in the corner of a dark room, James Turrell has been creating powerful works that dazzle and stupefy viewers. For over four decades, Turrell has sought out new frontiers in the treatment and use of the materials of light that combine light, dark, perception and situation. Initially working with natural light and forms of projection, Turrell has since expanded his practice to include media such as large-scale Land art, minimal constructs that merge sculpture and architecture and holography.

In the same year that *Afrum-Proto* was completed, Turrell purchased the Mendota Block, a site in Ocean Park, California that had formerly been a hotel. Turrell proceeded to augment sections of this building through the construction of additional walls, smoothly plastering surfaces and painting entire rooms (floors included) a stark white.[1] Turrell used meticulously carved-out holes in the walls of the hotel and projection techniques to create poetic light-forms that at times took on multi-dimensional qualities, transforming the hotel to studio and then finally to the work itself. [2]

The implications of *studio as art* have been exponentially increased in Turrell's ongoing land art project at Roden Crater. Spanning a large site near Flagstaff, Arizona, Turrell oversees the construction of a complex of spaces that combine experiences of light, dark and space in a project he has been working on since 1975 (though the actual purchase took place in 1979).[3] Turrell's work at the Mendota Block and his continuing progress at the Roden Crater provide an interesting opportunity to examine the nature of his studio practice, particularly through explication of his treatment and use of the materials (including the studio itself), the stylistic innovations therein and his intention while doing so. Turrell's alternative treatment of the studio is quite different than what Caroline Jones describes as *non-studio* in reference to Robert Smithson:

> "Rather, the non-studio attribute is a kind of theoretical positioning within a newly valued discourse of post-modernism, indicating that the studio will be denied sole importance as the site of creation or meaning."[4]

1 Calvin Tomkins, *Lives of the Artists* (Henry Holt and Co., 2008), 106.

2 Nicholas Philip James, *James Turrell: Inside Outside* (CV Publications (1 Sep 2005)), 7.

3 Craig E. Adcock, *James Turrell: The Art of Light and Space* (University of California Press, 1990), 156.

4 Caroline A Jones, *Machine in the Studio: Constructing the Postwar American Artist* (University of Chicago Press, 1998), 271.

While she indicates that Smithson maintained studio space here and there while embarking out into the world to physically realize his art projects, Turrell united studio and art practice into one homogenous being.

Before beginning a career in art, Turrell attended Pomona College in Claremont, California where he studied psychology and mathematics. This non-traditional precursor to an MFA in fine art at Claremont College led Turrel to become more concerned with human perception than with traditional art investigation. His goal therefore became to plumb the depths of how and why we perceive light and space in a very elemental, alchemical manner. From the epiphanies of *Afrum-Proto* and his early experiments with light (using blank slides and a high-wattage projector during a short stint at the University of California at Irvine), Turrell began to hone the crafting of light, space and perception in a manner that would grow to include the space of both creation and exhibition:

> "By making something out of light with light filling space, I am concerned with issues of how we perceive. It's not only a reaction to things physical. For me, working with light in large spaces was more a desire to work in larger realms, a desire that art not be limited to the European structure of works on canvas."[5]

The *large spaces* Turrell describes first took shape through the alteration of the studios at the Mendota Block. Initially, Turrell literally built a wall between himself and the outside world while altering the structure of the former hotel in order to experiment with the projected light structures in a pure environment. The pristine, smooth and absolutely dark interiors became not only the *studio*—in which Turrell could think, experiment and perfect—but also an inseparable component of the work as a *whole*. After months of monastic experimentation and sensory deprivation, Turrell opened a window for ventilation and was struck with the power of a shaft of sunlight crossing the room. The qualities of headlights and fleeting sources of moving light that occurred throughout the night led to precision construction of holes, or *Stoppages.* The *Mendota Stoppages*, as they would be called, consisted of inviting guests into the spaces, entertaining them for a short time in the living area of the studios and finally bringing them into the spaces to view a performance of the phenomena of light and space. Turrell cut his first

5 James Turrell, *Mapping spaces: A topological survey of the work by James Turrell*(Peter Blum Edition, 1987), Statement

Skyspace from the roof of the hotel, an act that would inform many works to come.[6]

From the onset of the experimentations in form and performance that comprised the *Mendota Stoppages*, it was impossible to separate the space from the art. Rather than abandoning the studio altogether, Turrell was able to fuse the two in a way that neither negated nor criticized studio practice. The Roden Crater project, in its three decades of progress, shows this unique approach in grand scale. In an era when many artists were working outside of accepted art venues, such as De Maria and Smithson, Turrell sought out a site in nature to create a more ambitious project. Smithson struggled with what Jones calls a relationship with technology that was "oscillatory and complex," in that he had worked with technology in the construction of pieces like *Spiral Jetty* but criticized his contemporaries for taking part in technological collaboration.[7] Turrell is (and was) at once aware of the role of technology in the arts and comfortable with his relationship to technological sensibility:

> "The work I do does not have to do with science or demonstrations of scientific principles. My work has to do with perception—how we see and how we perceive. Though I use the information and need the help of people in the sciences to calculate positions of celestial events and to solve problems of refraction caused by atmospheric pressure and temperature, for example, my work does not push the boundaries of science. I think artists have a lot more to do with investigating the limits of perception than science does at this time. The basic difference, though, is one of intent. I am more interested in posing questions than answering them."[8]

His desire was to take the concepts he pioneered in the Mendota Hotel to the desert, crafting a volcano-cum-temple, in which he would build a grandiose artwork filled with cavities of light sensing and a conical celestial vault.[9]

That Turrell would need to convince many intermediaries of the efficacy of his project, cajole a successful land buyer to sell him the land on which the crater sat and become a cattle rancher in order to secure the loan that would cement his ownership of the land is beyond the scope of this paper. How Turrell combined ideation, aquisition and creation of a complex work

6 Adcock, 85.

7 Jones, 330.

8 Turrell, Statement

9 Tomkins, 110.

of art with a place that was simultaneously *studio* (physical location) and *studio* (atmosphere of creative exposition and execution) is the critical purpose of what is discussed here. As was true at the Mendota Block, the art works that comprise the Roden Crater and the crater itself are inseparable. Rather than simply housing Turrell's work or being converted into something as basic as an extremely out-of-the-way alternative gallery space, the Roden Crater will be a naked eye observatory and a pantheon to light and celestial phenomena.

Jones describes Smithson's take on the traditional role of the studio as “a source of modernist isolation that must now be opposed.”[10] It is clear, however, that this type of isolation that Smithson found so objectionable and incompatible with his views on his own practice and within his critiques of others has been an integral component of Turrell's success. Turrell has been quite comfortable working outside the traditional “white cube” art world—he has triumphantly inserted his intention and philosophy into his work in innovative and often iconoclastic representations of thoughts, feelings and experiences. These manifest themselves alternately through isolation, deprivation and a profound sense of what is heavenly and eternal. Perhaps his intuitive love of the perception of what is eternal and dynamic all around us—light, space, celestial bodies marching across the day and night sky—has aided his unification of studio and art. While Smithson and all of the others struggled with the banal conflicts of studio or non-studio, Turrell has chosen a path similar to Rilke:

> “Let me put aside every desire, every relationship except this one, so that my heart grows used to its farthest spaces. Better that it live fully aware, in the terror of its stars, than as if protected, soothed by what is near.”[11]

Turrell's accomplishments and philosophy show very clearly that one need not choose *studio*, *non-studio* or *anti-studio*. While artists work in an era that has been called *post-studio*, where and how the artist works is an integral component of the end product.
The *Mendota Stoppages* and Roden Crater project have been fashioned by their environment and cannot be separated in any manner as merely location—they are a gestalt entity.

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10 Jones, 272.

11 Rainer Maria Rilke, *Selected Poems of Rainer Maria Rilke* (Harper Perennial).