Orders of Experience: 
The Evolution of the Landscape Art-Object

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ABSTRACT

Does art tend towards immersion? Positing James Turrell’s Roden Crater (2015) as the modern epitome of the landscape art-object, the evolution of the medium is traced through prominent examples its transformations: Titian’s Venus and the Organist with Dog (1550), De Loutherbourg’s Eidophusikon (1781), and Barker’s Panorama (1792). Discussion regarding Roden Crater’s predecessors serve to illustrate distinct innovations which greatly influenced its construction of sensory experience, spanning the use of dialogue to the integration of physicality. This chronology is used to demonstrate an overarching tendency of media towards immersion, and to reflect how the development of contemporary culture evolves towards progressively psychological experiences.

KEYWORDS

Art History, James Turrell, Landscape Art, Phenomenology, Visual Culture

INTRODUCTION

When a medium can evolve and adapt to capture more attention, it will. This is an inclination pervasive in all realms of media—from smartphones to augmented reality, when we consider how the mediating layers between people and technology have diminished over time, this notion becomes obvious. Throughout the course of history, we have continually bridged the gap between the physical and technological, as we now cross the final layers between the asceticism of pre-Industrial society and the hyper-connectivity of the future. In this essay, I argue this phenomenon is symptomatic of an overarching tendency of media towards immersion. I seek to understand how and why the notion of ‘experiential’ has become so salient in modernity, and will discuss these phenomena through the evolution of landscape art-object. I have chosen to examine the landscape genre because unlike any other, it embodies a visual rhetoric that necessitates the physical, where meaning is created, not observed—unlike the didactic practices of traditional art that solely encompass the act of seeing (Jelić, 2015). I will posit James Turrell as the culmination of this tendency, because of his synthesis of the viewing and sensing spaces: viewing space, wherein one merely ‘sees’ something (as with most exhibited art), and sensing space, wherein one ‘feels’ something and engages it on a sensory level (“The Wolfsburg Project,” 2009). The bridging of these spaces is necessary to sensory experience, and is the boundary wherein art is either observed, or is felt. To understand Turrell’s work, I will reconcile Roden Crater (2015) with what I propose are three historical antecedents: the dialogue of Titian’s Venus and The Organist with Dog (1550), the phenomenology of Philip James De Loutherbourg’s Eidophusikon (1781), and the physicality of Robert Barker’s 19th century Panorama (1792). I will examine these innovations in the landscape art-object to demonstrate how the amalgamation of the viewing and sensing space have come to define landscape art as the visual rhetoric of ‘experience’—demonstrating art’s overarching tendency towards immersion.

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TURRELL’S RODEN CRATER (2015)

James Turrell is one of few to utilize the low-level coding processes behind the brain’s interpretation of the world in order to manipulate experience. Where the art historical canon is devoted to the viewing of art, Turrell focuses on the experience, the perception of the art. This begets the question, what is Roden Crater? This piece, which I purport to be the modern paragon of immersion in art, is James Turrell’s magnum opus. Having created an expansive body of installation work centered around perceptual experimentation, Turrell’s influence in art has been far-reaching. His oeuvre is distinctly different from most artists—he identifies his material as light and his medium as perception (Hylton, 2013). Located in the Painted Desert, Northern Arizona, Roden Crater is a volcanic cinder cone he purchased four decades ago with a Guggenheim grant. The epitome of the landscape art-object, he has meticulously tailored it into a naked-eye observatory with a total of 21 viewing spaces and 6 tunnels in order to create an experience of light and shadow in geological and celestial time (Matts & Tynan, 2012). It is an art that elicits surrender—he first isolates his audience geographically through its remote location, and then isolates with the distinctly unitary space. Borrowing theory from Kengo Kuma, a renown Japanese architect, it is an architecture of erasure, one that through naturalistic, psychological vernacular, achieves unification with its environment (Bognar et al., 2009). With Roden Crater, Turrell sought to humanize astronomical phenomena, but contrary to what its description might suggest, it is not merely a curation of views, nor a framing device for these objects (“About Roden Crater,” n.d). With profound understanding of human perception, Turrell creates a space that one must discover. This requisite interaction is unprecedentedly dialogical and is highly distinct from the act of viewing because there is no hiding nor revealing—it is created through discovery. This happens because Turrell’s design is a carefully constructed framework, revealing the unobstructed totality and wholeness of the sky and its celestial bodies. It is overwhelmingly physical, meant to be touched and experienced. It eludes the photograph, there is no element of presentation—Roden Crater demonstrates knowing “perceptual and bodily responses precede conscious awareness…”, noting that “pre-reflective judgment of architectural space is delivered by perceptual experience…” (Jelić, 2015). This speaks to Turrell’s ability to engage perception—by allowing participants the agency for exploration in a designed environment, they are actually able to create the reality themselves—akin to the natural affect discovering the sublime (“James Turrell’s Roden Crater,” 2013). These phenomenological elements are what Turrell uses to bridge the viewing and the sensing spaces; it is made with specific attention to perception so there is never just one sensory experience occurring at any time—it is always a multitude. Roden Crater borrows a number of key elements which amalgamate to represent the tendency of art towards immersion—as a statement for what it takes to affect people. The sublimity of Roden Crater expresses a physical understanding of the emotional, not offering viewers an experience of language, but “an experience of the absence of language.” (Lunberry, 2009).

TITIAN’S VENUS AND THE ORGANIST WITH DOG (1550)

The face of the 16th century Venetian school, Titian is a relevant case for this narrative as a revered innovator in early landscape painting. His expression of dimension, colour, and brushwork influenced Western art for centuries to come—and his ability to integrate the viewer into painting to create experience set him apart. Early in the chronology of the landscape art-object, Titian’s work exhibited an innate understanding of landscape’s sensorial capacities. At that time, landscape works were few and far between, largely depicted idealistically. While he was no exception to this, Titian never failed to engender tension between the viewing and the sensing space, as demonstrated in his 1550
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