
Irwin's work was created for Chinati's U-shaped temporary exhibition space and was installed by the artist in the summer of 2006. The work opened during the museum's Open House on October 6 and was on view through July 31, 2007. The installation consisted of two long, double-sided scrim walls, one in black and one in white, each running nearly the length of the building, each measuring 106' X 8' 10". In the shorter connecting arm were two double-sided, abutting scrim walls, each measuring 37' 2" X 8' 10".

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ADRIAN KOHN

See Like Irwin

TAKING TIME, PAYING ATTENTION

Robert Irwin made a refreshing claim at a 1976 symposium organized by the Philadelphia College of Art [fig. 2, p. 21]. "I don't think there's anyone who knows as much about what I do as myself," he submitted, "and there's nobody who's more conscientious about it than I am." The declaration was bold, blunt, and also self-evident. All the same, Irwin felt it necessary to make the point explicit: we do well to remember that artists are the experts on their own art, a truism that nevertheless escapes some reviewers and many scholars. This candor and assurance came easy for Irwin given the rigor of his work habits, which, inside the studio or within a public gallery, surrounded by desert or amid a garden, involve hours of looking. By and large, artists demand such exertion from themselves. For the most part, though, they fail to receive it in turn from those ancillary to the creative act. Unaccustomed visual sensations elicit a range of reactions from the art public, often indifference, at times hostility, but seldom wide-eyed curiosity. Irwin complained that "we don't pay attention[,] we don't look and we don't open up to the idea that art really does inform us."
environment. There is a catch, however. To learn, one must trust both art and artist; resolute skepticism only obstructs meaningful engagement. Irwin’s work makes for good practice in this regard since his straightforward premises can be tested with ease. Take a closer look somewhere familiar and judge whether or not you recognize anything new. “What I’m really trying to do,” Irwin summed up, “is to draw your attention to, my attention to, looking at and seeing all those things that have been going on all along, but which have been previously too incidental or too meaningless to really seriously enter into the dialogue of our whole visual structure, our picture of the world.”

Admitting ignorance may sting at first for savvy viewers, but doing so enables eventual discovery. Irwin knows something most of us do not, a skill he taught himself, has investigated for the last five decades, and remains willing to share—a different way to see. The inevitable obscurity of the art he made in pursuit of this capacity put him at risk of misplaced accusations of elitism. In the 1970s, innovation seemed undemocratic to some. Irwin responded deftly. “The obscurity of this original act...is often thought of, from social views, as elitism[, which] is simply not true,” he contended. “Ideas and inquiry are always obscure to begin with and the accusation of elitism is totally incorrect [because] elitism is the private use of ideas for personal gain and power.” Far from an exclusionary project, Irwin seeks heightened perception, a goal everyone can attain
and enjoy. “This thing is totally free. Anybody can participate, and it’s totally available if you’re interested,” Irwin affirmed. “My highest ambition,” he pledged, “is, in a sense, to make you see a little bit more tomorrow than you saw today.” Sensory richness exists all around, just overlooked. Developing the obscure, not elitist, ability to notice more of it requires only curiosity, time, and attention.

In daily life, however, we lack all three of those. Navigating the world demands efficient handling of a constant sensory flood. Since seeing everything is neither possible nor desirable, definite goals help us allocate concentration and determine what to ignore. “If I want to go from here to the door,” Irwin ventured, “certain pieces of information are critical to my getting there. Other pieces of information are peripheral. So, I will set up, or define, or distinguish those things which are critical to that act.” The floor between here and there, the table in the way, and the doorknob would rank high in priority among objects in the proposed visual field. Scrutinize these, maybe glance over whatever is adjacent, and disregard the rest. With frequent repetition from infancy on, such paring comes to happen in an instant, and we get very good at seeing only what we need to make it from here to the door. The problem lies in extending this successful technique to everything else all the time. “We block out
that information which is not critical to our activities[,] and after a while, you know, you do that repeatedly, day after day after day, and the world begins to take on a kind of fairly uniform look to it," Irwin warned. Perceptual efficiency has a downside: very little of what is in front of the eyes at any moment registers.

INCHES, MILLIMETERS, MILS
Viewing art, like approaching a door, may resemble an automated routine at times. Spend a few moments observing, compare and contrast with something seen before, then press on to the next piece. Irwin's work requires more vigilance than that. His own exhaustive methods demonstrate another mode of vision, inefficient to be sure but also far more acute than usual. With his late oil-on-canvas line paintings under way in the studio between 1962 and 1964 [fig. 1, p. 20], Irwin "started spending this time just sitting there looking": "I would look for about fifteen minutes and just nod off, just go to sleep. And I'd wake up in about fifteen minutes, and I'd concentrate and look, sort of just mesmerize myself, and I'd conk off again....I'd look for a half an hour, sleep for a half an hour.[...] I just literally went to the studio at eight o'clock in the morning, and I came out of there at twelve midnight, and I did it seven days a week." Maintaining an uninterrupted gaze for fifteen or thirty minutes demands considerable
effort. Often the mind lurches after a few seconds, clutching at anything to ponder besides the artwork or, more subtly, mulling over what significance the act itself of staring so intently might have. Either reflex amounts to abandoning careful examination, as Irwin learned. He had trouble mustering the necessary focus at first. "I just did not have that kind of attention span, that kind of intensity," he admitted. Soon after, Irwin persevered through a withering regimen to elevate his sensitivity. "Time became the one ally: that I would spend time looking," he remembered. "I just forced myself to stay there in the beginning [...] whether I did anything or didn't do anything, whether I was able to work or not able to work, I simply would not let myself leave." Irwin came to realize a straightforward principle—the longer he looked, the more he saw.

Uncommon perceptions ensued. When Irwin began experimenting with his line paintings, he picked up on distinctions previously invisible. "The senses are fantastically severe instruments if you really start letting them read," he attested. "I would sit there and look at these two lines. Then I'd move one of them up an eighth of an inch... and I could see that there was a difference." He went even further in a 1971 interview: "If I raised the width of a line by the thickness of a piece of paper it actually changed the whole physical structure of the painting." It is tempting to treat these statements as exaggeration for rhetorical effect. After all, an eighth-inch discrepancy may have serious consequences in many circumstances outside art, but a paper-thin deviation of four mils—four thousandths of an inch, the thickness of typical office letterhead—amounts to an unacceptable margin only in the most technical operations. Nevertheless, Irwin intended his words to be perfectly literal. Spotting an eighth-inch divergence sounds feasible with practice; perhaps detecting an alteration thirty times smaller and at the limits of unaided sight is indeed possible, as Irwin claimed. He remarked on his last series of paintings that "the lines [were] spaced such that your eye could not really ever read the two lines simultaneously." Attaining this delicate suspension of focus required weeks of trial and error—repositioning the horizontals a millimeter higher and then lower, making them a few mils taller then shorter. "I don't know if anybody else would ever look at them long enough.
to arrive at that,” Irwin conceded, “but time was certainly necessary for judgment.” Seeing a tad more took far longer, but he felt his findings warranted the effort.

In Crazy Otto of 1962 (fig. 3), an earlier painting casually named after a local pub, Irwin’s minuscule modifications bring about intriguing visual effects. Eighteen inches or so above the bottom edge of the greenish-brown, mustard-yellow canvas lies a pale powder blue stripe, about a quarter-inch tall. A second line of the same height and hue rests twenty-one inches higher and a third twenty inches above that. Up another three inches, a darker blue horizontal extends across. The glossy finish and tiny edgewise lip sharpen these hand-painted lines against the uniform brushy and matte ground. When compared, these elements of Crazy Otto manifest a wide scope in their degrees of difference. For instance, as exact chromatic complements, the colors of the mustard canvas and three powder blue stripes could not contrast more. And yet the blue of these three horizontal lines could hardly be closer to that of the darker topmost line, painted the same hue but an adjacent gradation of value. The spacing of the stripes generates curious phenomena as well. The heights of the lower three mustard regions vary while remaining too alike to see as stable ratios, such as one-to-two or two-to-three. Rather, the divisions by turns suggest and contradict a ratio of one-to-one-to-one. The area under the middle pale blue line is the largest of the three but also, because of its size
and centrality, most susceptible to the
tendency of flat painted surfaces to
appear somewhat concave. Its shal-
low recession restores a rough parity
to the height of the smaller and less
affected sections above and below it.
Still, this apparent correspondence
holds true only from a head-on view-
point—an oblique angle verifies the
actual incongruity.
Compounding this spatial oscillation
in Crazy Otto, Irwin accentuated the
“interplay between [its] lines” and
“sense of perspective” by shortening
the stripes toward the top of the paint-
ing.\textsuperscript{18} The horizontal at the bottom is
about fifty-four inches long. The line
near the center, also fifty-four inches,
stretches a quarter-inch farther on
both ends than the one above it.
That stripe, in turn, reaches beyond
the upper darker blue horizontal by
the same amount. The slight disparity
between the top pair flickers into and
out of recognition: you seem to get
an intuition of their unequal lengths
as opposed to seeing this outright.
The second and third line, separated
by twenty rather than three inches,
are all the more difficult to appre-
hend together and compare. Irwin
maximized this particular effect in his
final paintings with two orange hori-
izontals on an orange ground. “Those
lines had no actual focal aspect to
them at all. There were no real fig-
figure-ground relationships,” he com-
mented. “Your eye, in the late line
paintings, tends to become caught
up in a sort of so-called negative
space [...] suspended in the space
between [stripes].”\textsuperscript{19} Familiar modes
of vision fall short. Crazy Otto and
the untitled late line paintings stray
from what one already knows, resem-
bling neither real three-dimensional
space nor its common pictorial anal-
ogies such as figures on a ground.\textsuperscript{20}
Subtle measuring millimeters or
even mils required that Irwin see in
a new way.

PHENOMENA
Ten subsequent dot paintings from
1964 to 1966 overwhelm the capa-
bilities of human eyesight [fig. 4]. In
one such work, Irwin dabbed on a
hundred thousand millimeter-wide
lavender and kelly-green dots.\textsuperscript{21}
The green marks cease at a radius
of thirty inches; the lavender spots
extend another six inches; and,
encircling these, a band of underly-
ing lead white primer continues to
the edge. Irwin adhered to a com-
plicated coloration scheme. As with
Crazy Otto, he started out with pre-
cise complements, lavender and kelly-green in one painting, orange and blue for another, yellow and violet in a third. Dots in and around the center have high saturations of these hues, but lightening tints the farther out they are. "I put on the dots, say, starting with very strong red, as rich as possible, (and) moving out to the edge, becoming less and less intense," Irwin recounted. "Then I took the exact opposite color and put a green dot in between every one of the red dots." An unusual support accompanies this arduous painting technique. Irwin spent a year perfecting the interior latticework needed to hold a combered shell. "I wanted the canvas to have a slightly convex surface to it—in other words, slightly curving, bowing toward you," he explained. "Built and strutted like an airplane wing," as Irwin put it, the structure swells on both sides, with a rear brace securing it "off from the wall just enough so that you couldn’t compare it to the wall." The frontal rounding measures about two inches at its highest point and remains indiscernible from more than a couple feet. "You didn’t say, ah, a curved canvas, and attach it to an idea," Irwin emphasized. "You only picked up, very subliminally, this added energy." The word "subliminal" is apt. Stimuli in Irwin’s art often fall below the threshold of awareness but elicit a response all the same. Of course, identifying something as subliminal negates its present status as such. And therein lies confirmation of discovery—you see more now than you once could.
Perplexing phenomena in the dot paintings waver between reality and illusion while fluctuating into and out of conscious perception. The teeming specks, too tiny and numerous to process one by one, trigger localized visual breakdowns throughout the painting. "In the center, they essentially cancelled each other out," Irwin noted. "You didn't see either green or red but rather ... the energy generated by the interaction between the two." A thin translucent plane, grayish in hue, whose soft glow also emits periodic incondescent sparkles, seems to float within the canvas but then beyond it in the gallery as well. Squarish shapes shimmer and circulate like phosphores. Oddly, these hotspots change scale in inverse proportion to the painting's size in the visual field: when you stand ten feet away, they look smaller and, at twenty feet, larger. To Irwin, these manifold illusions "create[e] physical space which is occupied by a physical kind of energy." "If you took a little time," he advised, "this energy would actually grow and get stronger and stronger." What Irwin described as energy is decidedly not metaphysical, which the word can sometimes suggest. The overloaded eyes see actual phenomena in real space, despite what the mind thinks it knows to be so.

Illusions intensify in Irwin's next series of disc paintings, which coalesce with ambient light and shadow [fig. 5]. The circular supports, fabricated in two materials and three sizes, retain a shallow camber. The earlier aluminum discs have a diameter of either four or five feet and the later acrylic plastic works measure fifty-four inches wide. Irwin again used an innovative painting technique. The front of the disc accumulated between fifty and a hundred coats of lacquer as he "sprayed on thin, transparent layers of color over a silver-white metallic ground...from just enough distance to cause it to become slightly grained." "This grain," Irwin added, "faceted and diffused the light to create a matte finish, as opposed to a hard, shiny automotive surface." The discs appear translucent though also opaque, reflective yet absorptive, discrete but then indistinguishable from the wall behind. Perception has little experience handling sensations this contradictory in concept.

Irwin had separate aims for the center and circumference of the discs. "At the edges I made a very slight color and value change, to lose the
edge in the shadow space [behind it],” he remarked. Suspended twenty inches out from the wall, a large 1966–67 aluminum work is painted a cream-white faintly tinted with pink, violet, blue, green, yellow, and grayish purple in successive rings from hub to lip. These chromatic fluctuations at first magnify the two-inch swell of the surface. Staring at the disc head-on, one may see instead a sphere, mistakenly construing five feet of nonexistent depth to correspond with its real five-foot diameter. Illusions abound as the eyes begin losing focus and retinal fatigue sets in. Shadows gleam and project rather than withdrawing. Pulses of light race around the rim. And then, like Irwin intended, the eyes’ ability to differentiate the disc, shadows, and wall falters. Large swathes of all three dissolve into and emerge from each other every so often as one’s acuity slumps and recovers. At the disc’s center, Irwin perceived “a [visual] field density that operated on the eye similar to a ganz field” or Ganzfeld, a featureless optical environment that he in turn likened to “putting your head inside a ping-pong ball...that’s lit evenly, so that you have no visual point or no focus point.” A Ganzfeld, a ping-pong ball interior; Irwin
tried a third analogy to convey phenomena without commonplace precedent. "The center has a density that would be like reaching your hand into and meeting the resistance of, say, water," he proposed. "And the space around it has slightly less, as if you were reaching your hand into a windy day." The leap from touch to sight notwithstanding, the disparity in material density between two fluids, water and air, resembles the incongruity in so-called visual density between the disc's inner and outer illusions.

In place of the modulating hues, values, and saturations on the aluminum paintings, Irwin varied the white lacquer's opacity (a fourth quality of applied color) on the discs made of clear acrylic plastic [fig. 6]. "I sprayed out from the center, working from an opaque white through a translucent one so that they became completely transparent around the edge," he commented. A gray band across the face of the discs, which tapers off and vanishes before the adjacent white does, seems far behind or ahead of where it in fact is. Irwin's specialized but uncomplicated lighting set-up enhances such illusions. Four 150-watt floods, two above and two below, at the left and right about six feet out in front, cast a complex of light and dark back onto the wall. Four arcs, each constituting three-quarters of a full circle, rest beyond the four quadrants of the disc. These lobes have shadowy perimeters but a dim inner glow. Darker arches also arise at the top, bottom, and both sides of the disc where the circular forms overlap. Slivers of these layered shadows intersect yet again in spots. As you keep peering ahead, these phenomena continue to alter. The disc, wall, light, and dark converge and separate; the gray band advances and recedes.

To witness these exceptional illusions, one must monitor more of the visual field and for longer than usual. With its narrowness and haste, everyday seeing cannot but overlook such subtleties. Concerning fruitless attempts to view the dot paintings in particular, Irwin acknowledged that "for a lot of people—it's like there's nothing there." He felt that his own level of awareness was improving with practice however, unveiling rare sensations that in turn redoubled his curiosity and scrutiny. "I became ... able to discern a little bit more than I did originally[,] therefore I had more interest, or more to look at,"
he explained. "Second, I developed a better attention span[,] I was able to sustain my attention longer than I did in the beginning and began to develop or extend that time."39 Expectations of expediency betray an opportunity to let the eyes linger on Irwin's art, and perhaps make discoveries. The dot and disc paintings refine acuity across the board, eliciting unaccustomed examination of sights already familiar, first glimpses of phenomena heretofore subliminal, and newfound sensitivity—albeit unconscious—to stimuli altogether imperceptible before.

RECALIBRATING THE SENSES
Beginning in November 1968, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art's blockbuster exhibition program titled "Art and Technology" gave Irwin a chance to investigate perception with artist James Turrell and Ed Wortz, head of life sciences research at a local aerospace firm.40 "We had ourselves, one at a time, put in an anechoic chamber[,] a totally sound-dampened space," Irwin reported. "They would put us in there, turn the lights off, and then close the space" [fig. 7, p. 26].41 The team used the facility at UCLA, which minimized several kinds of sensation: "it was suspended so that even the rotation of the earth was not reflected in it, or
any sounds being bounced through the earth—a jackhammer five miles away or something. Nothing went into that space. And no light at all. ...You had no visual and no audio input. As when studying his paintings for days on end, Irwin spent outlandish lengths of time in this stark space. “We made one basic rule,” he mentioned. “In the beginning, say, we would not move from the chair. We’d just simply sit in the center of the room. And we got so that we’d spend maybe six or eight hours in there alone, each of us.”

After less than fifteen minutes, one of the team’s test subjects described vivid illusions including “blue-gray after-images on a darker-grey field,” “rod-shaped blue things and lights swelling in from [the] sides,” and “faces from weird angles.” Over the course of several hours in the chamber, Irwin said he experienced full-blown “retinal replay,” ongoing hallucinations that duplicate previous optical response. Confronted with a severe diminution of activity, the ravenous senses recalibrate to detect something, anything, from the dark silent stillness.

A profound perceptual boost occurs upon exiting such sparse conditions.
The eyes, now hypersensitive, stay retuned for a while. "I'd walk down the same street that I'd walked down coming in, and the trees were still trees, and the street was still a street, and houses were still houses, but the world did not look the same," Irwin remembered. "It was very, very noticeably altered." In short, he saw more. Perception takes time to recover its efficient editing after long periods of limited excitation. Everything pours in, and with overwhelming detail. "There is a certain way you look and see every day," Irwin posited, "but when you're suddenly cut off for six or eight hours and then come back to it, there's a kind of change in the threshold [and] the acuity of the mechanism." The threshold at which phenomena become invisible plunges. Acuity soars. Bounding back outside with the standard visual shortcuts in check means beholding the world's mesmerizing lushness in full. In the forty years since his anechoic chamber experiments, Irwin has modified dozens of locations to accentuate their sensory nuance. "To just treat the environment itself," he summarized his goals, "to deal with the quality of a space in terms of its
weight, its temperature, its tactility, its density—all those semi-intangible things, in a sense, that we don’t normally deal with. The point being, maybe making it a little clearer.”48 A 2006–07 project in Marfa, Texas, serves as an example. At the Chinati Foundation, Irwin altered a rectangular barracks with long wings on the north and south, a shorter connecting hall along the west, and an open courtyard to the east. Inside the north wing, two parallel planes of black scrim halve the corridor lengthwise by stretching floor to ceiling and almost end to end between two wood beams [see plan, p. 19]. This partition regulates the incoming natural light. Whereas a single layer of scrim allows plenty of the desert sun to pass through, Irwin’s structure traps and dissipates much of it in the five-inch gap between the dual sheets. He also added a dark tint to the glazing in this corridor, diminishing the interior brightness even more. The perimeter, for instance, maintains a soft luster except where three passageways in the scrim barrier align with three glass doors to the courtyard. Here, rhombuses of light unfurl over the floor and fold up onto the opposite wall. These forms shift in dimension
(length, width, incline) and appearance (color, brilliance, sharpness) as the sun arcs across the sky. Complementing the black median, a white divider cuts through the building's south wing. The white scrim reflects direct and ambient sunshine to a greater degree, retaining its hues as well. The material flushes yellow and pink in the late morning of a clear spring day, deepens to gold and rose in the afternoon, and blanches to pale blues and grays during early evening. A third, black-and-white double partition bisects the shorter west corridor. With no glazing, this area ranges from dim to dark.

"A lot of people will just say, 'Oh, it's an empty room,'" Irwin noted of his spaces in general. "All those things going on in that room, all that physicality in that room, somehow does not exist." Actually," he pointed out, "the room is not empty. I mean, on any kind of perceptual level, that room is very complex. It's loaded with shapes, edges, corners, shadows, surface, you know, textural changes." These elusive and ephemeral details of the sensory flux intrigue Irwin most. To catch sight of them at Chinati and everywhere else, scrutiny must trump efficiency. Recall
Irwin's exertion with his line paintings: "It was even a question of staying in the studio and simply not going out. ...After a while, when you don't leave and you're there, you begin to occupy yourself either in looking or beginning to try and think about it." It may become necessary to will oneself to stay put and keep looking. Multiple visits and hours of examination reveal a staggering complexity in fits and starts. Again and again, you see what had escaped notice earlier.

English lacks a common word for the sunlit shapes inside the Chinati building. They are the counterparts of shadows in a way—areas that remain illuminated where an interposed opaque object (such as a wall) does not deflect light. For example, short gleaming bars shine onto the scrim, repeating the intervals of the glazing opposite them [Fig. 8, p. 27]. More rhombuses overlay the floor's gridded concrete slabs by the east windows of both wings. Wavy lines team within these forms due to a differential between the air and ground temperatures outside that generates optical distortion. All edges seem fuzzy and shimmering. The shapes themselves dim and brighten with passing clouds and windswept dust. "If [the] light changes in the day, or simply changes as it did now when a cloud went by... everything in that room is altered," Irwin contended. The bars vanish at mid-morning until the next day. Each rhombus narrows, elongates, and warps, tilting ever
more northeast during the afternoon. At sunset, sparkling peach silhouettes of the west doors modulate from pinkish yellow through pale orange before fading from the inner wall of the west corridor.

Many other phenomena start to register once the senses adjust to this level of incidence. Mundane interior features all of a sudden appear striking. In the south wing, facing the courtyard, opaque white wood strips blaze against the duller translucent scrim that they anchor to the ceiling and floor. Moiré patterns flow between the scrim sheets as you walk about. Splayed web-like cracks in the concrete slabs contrast with recurrent wiry hairline fissures on the walls. The other senses share in this increased acuity as well. Footsteps echo; the wind groans and whistles between the louvered vents on the exterior gables. The concrete floor is cool, the untinted windows warm. As a unique mode of perception develops, entire realms of unaccustomed information become accessible.

SEEING ANEW

The test of Irwin's art may be how much more it enables you to apprehend, both in its vicinity and elsewhere. For instance, he described how a gallery of Chicago's Museum of Contemporary Art had looked all along, prior to his 1975–76 installation: "You have a white wall, a white floor, and a white ceiling. [And] you
have a black kickboard [...] so that when the janitor mops the place he doesn't get the wall dirty.” “Graphically speaking, that's a powerful element,” Irwin insisted. “In an all-white environment, you have this black line racing all the way around the room. ... It should hit you hard, because it's far and away the strongest visual element in the situation.”53 [fig. 9, p. 28] His building at Chinati has a similar feature. A slit, one-sixteenth of an inch wide, contours the interior where the walls meet the ceiling and floor, broadening to a quarter-inch at the east end of both corridors. In Chicago, after laying a band of black tape across the floor to connect the left and right mopgards, Irwin noticed that “you became aware of that black line running through the entire museum, which you were not that aware of on the way in.”54 Likewise at Chinati, Irwin's work in a particular barracks also reveals the tiny channel circumscribing the interiors of those nearby. Spotting this oddity might seem a trivial discovery were it not that the line demonstrates potential to overwhelm other visual events, including exhibited artworks. In the south wing, the jet-black groove radiates and zooms through the utter whiteness. In the north wing, one can see the chromatic variance possible with black—the scrim's translucent darkness, the opaque paint's absorption of light on the two-dimensional surfaces of the wood beams, and the sheer absence of light in the three-dimensional crevice.

Leaving Irwin's building resembles his emergence from the anechoic chamber. Perception registers much of the sensory flux with little regard for efficiency. At night, for example, the typical street lamps on South Yale (just west of Chinati) appear extraordinary due to their assorted heights, spacing, brilliance, and hues including pink, violet, and white. In fact, municipal lighting proved to be one of Irwin's favorite phenomena. “I just look out the back window where I live,” he recounted in 1977. “There’s a parking lot behind the tree there, and there are two lights that are on all night, two overhead lights which are a kind of blue in color. And one small light, down low, is an incandescent, like a yellow light. I really love the look of that at night. I get up in the middle of the night, whenever I'm not sleeping, and go there and take a look at that—I like it that much.”55 Part of Irwin's project at the Whitney Museum the same year was to “indicate ... the recently installed
line of pink mercury vapor lights that inscribed the green/black rectangle of Central Park." Becoming more aware of the world at large constitutes the reward for looking so close somewhere in particular.

Irwin learned to see more by studying the stripes in Crazy Otto for days, gazing at different visual densities in front of the dot and disc paintings, and staring for hours into the silent darkness of an anechoic chamber. One can develop similar skills at the Chinati installation. Having accumulated this knowledge, though, Irwin warned against attempting to distill or translate it. In a 1978 symposium at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, he proposed a thought experiment: "Name all the events in a moment of perceptual experience. Do we have enough words to adequately reflect such a moment's real complexity?" To get from here to the door, yes, we probably have a satisfactory vocabulary. However, if the moment in question was spent perceiving for its own sake, sensing as much as possible, then certainly not. "The real actual phenomenon," Irwin held, "does not really exist in the painting [or] in the photograph [or] in the retelling." Words do not suffice when trying to convey the strange findings made available by intensive observation.

"A lot of people look at you like you've dropped your cookies," Irwin found. "It's not a verbal experience. ...When you spend this long playing with non-verbal forms, it gets hard to talk. You don't have a desire to talk about it. It doesn't work, and it doesn't feel right." At some point, words must cease and one's own senses take over.

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NOTES
3 Frederick S. Wight, "Robert Irwin" interview transcript, 1975-76, in "Los Angeles Art Community: Group Portrait" (Los Ange-
SEEING IS FORGETTING
THE NAME OF THE THING ONE SEES

A LIFE OF CONTEMPORARY ARTIST
ROBERT IRWIN

BY LAWRENCE WESCHLER