Robert Irwin
Part I: Prologue: \(x18^3\)
Part II: Excursus: Homage to the Square
Robert Irwin

I.

To be an artist is not a matter of making paintings or objects at all. What we are really dealing with is our state of consciousness and the shape of our perception.¹

The act of art is a tool for extended consciousness.²

The act of art has turned to a direct examination of our perceptual processes.³

We have chosen that experience out of the realm of experiences to be defined as "art," because having this label it is given special attention. Perhaps this is all "art" means—this Frame of Mind.⁴

If that state of consciousness I keep talking about became, in a sense, the consciousness of society as a whole, if we really thought in those terms, and were really that aware, . . . really that sense-sophisticated, then our art would be an integral part of our society, and the artist as a separate discipline or art as a separate event would not exist.⁵

Perhaps the future role of the artist will be to act directly as the arbiter of qualities in our lives. Quality not as an add-on, as it is now, but as criteria in all matters of planning.⁶

Any tool you use is legitimate. The key to the tool is whether it has the dimensions to deal with what have become your questions. I consider art as a thought form more than anything else.⁷

My art has never been about ideas. . . . My interest in art has never been about abstraction; it has always been about experience. . . . My pieces were never meant to be dealt with intellectually as ideas, but to be considered experientially.⁸

There is an essential kind of knowing, which comes from a purely phenomenological basis.⁹

What I would like to do is to make you aware that you see and that, by not being able to prejudice the situation, you suddenly become party to an entirely different structure of the state of the real. It's you that does it, not me. So it can't really manifest itself as an idea, or an object, or an event because any of these things becomes distracting and at least in part about itself.¹⁰
The thing is to maximize the physicality while minimizing the imagery.... Physicality is not transferable abstractly: the only way that you can deal with it is by being in its presence. That was the beginning of all this.¹¹

Qualities exist only as long as a perceiving individual keeps them in play.¹²

The relationship between art and the viewer is all firsthand now experience and there is no way it can be carried to you through any kind of secondary system [such as art criticism].¹³

When I do something in a museum or gallery situation, I feel I have to take on the role of an interactor. Since it's a cultural institution, it's a cultural activity. To pretend it's anything other than that, is somehow not to pay attention. The degree of control I want in such a situation is essentially absolute. I'm not interested in whether the museum has an opinion on how the situation is to be concluded. I don't think there's anyone who knows as much about what I do as myself and there's nobody who is more conscientious about it than I am. Yet at the same time, strangely enough, I find myself listening to everybody.¹⁴

What I have done has always been about the same single line of inquiry, but all of the means, methods, and positions I've taken have changed radically.¹⁵

In the studio you may reference nature but you also reference all art. The big shift for me is that my art practice is now not so much referenced art historically as it is conditionally. When I confront a space with its specific set of conditions, I try to take into account everything bearing on it. For example, a sense of scale is not only in and of itself but is equally conditioned by where you arrive from—the scale of the New York subway or the big sky country of Montana. I try to take all of this into account.¹⁶

The sculptural response draws all of its cues (reasons for being) from its surroundings. This requires the process to begin with an intimate, hands-on reading of the site. This means sitting, watching, and walking through the site, the surrounding areas (where you will enter from and exit to), the city at large or the countryside. Here there are numerous things to consider: What is the site's relation to applied and implied schemes of organization and systems of order, relation, architecture, use, distance, sense of scale? ... What is the physical and people density, the sound and visual density (quiet, next-to-quiet, or busy?) What are the qualities of surface, sound, movement, light, etc.? What are the qualities of detail, levels of finish, craft? What are the histories of prior or current
usage, present desires, etc.? A quiet distillation of all this—while directly experienc-
ing the site—determines all the facets of the "sculptural response": aesthetic sensi-
bility, levels and kinds of physicality, gesture, dimensions, materials, kind and level
of finish, details, etc.; whether the response should be monumental or ephemeral,
aggressive or gentle, useful or useless, sculptural, architectural, or simply the plant-
ing of a tree—or maybe even doing nothing at all.\(^{17}\)

In the realm of the phenomenal, "less is more" only when less is the sum total of
more.\(^{18}\)

The idea that an "old sculptural response" is the offending turd in the plaza is
as wrongminded as conceptualists saying "Painting is dead." On the contrary, in a
conditional world, on occasion a cannon on the front lawn maybe the appropriate
response.\(^{19}\)

Light has good physical properties for the question . . . of the substance of exis-
tence. . . . One of the things that I like about light especially is the degree of its
actual physical energy and the minimalness of the identity: as bit information, it
has almost none, and yet it has a very, very elaborate, very compound physicality to
it. It is a terrific medium for the problem right now.\(^{20}\)

What I want is the quality of light, its energy, its existence as matter. I don't want
the light bulb. Now, if I have to have the light bulb as imagery, I must have the
physicality compounded enough to override the presence of the light bulb in terms
of its identity. So a lot of my craft now is in terms of just that, I mean, trying to
keep that balance in my favor. Every element that I use is worked and reworked to
get it to have the maximum of that physicality and a minimum of that kind of extran-
eous light bulb imagery.\(^{21}\)

If light is the medium and space is the medium, then, in a sense, the universe is a
medium. I know the impracticality of it right now but when I say that the medium is
the universe, that maybe the world is an art form, then the gardening of our uni-
verse or our consciousness would be the level of our art participation. . . . That's
the reason for my participation in some other activities.\(^{22}\)

—Robert Irwin