

Tim Edensor

Light Art, Perception and Sensation

In considering the effects of light, it is useful to focus upon how the pioneering work of Dan Flavin reveals that illumination is always more than representational. Flavin's supposedly minimalist work expanded the use of colour by artists, intensifying its application and mixing colours across space, tinting walls and floors and human skin, and melding with the illuminated colour cast by other lights and daylight. These works transcended the fluorescent tubes he habitually used, tincturing place with glow, colour and intensity, exemplifying the 'levels' of light identified by Alphonso Lingis (1998). As Walter Benjamin remarks, '(W)hat, in the end, makes advertisements so superior to criticism? Not what the moving red neon sign says – but the fiery pool reflecting it in the asphalt' (1997: 476). Light glows and radiates, it transcends the cognitive and moves into the non-representational, the realm of the affective and sensual.

In this paper, I focus on how four artists working with light can bring to attention the crucial capacities of illumination in shaping our apprehension of the world. I draw on my own embodied and affective responses to these works and on occasion, on the responses of other co-visitors. This sensing is generally unreflexive, and we are stirred to awareness only when we confront an unusual form or quality of light, or are plunged into an unfamiliar darkness. The artists I discuss here bring to consciousness a wider grasp of the very particular human ways in which the visual system operates in making sense of the world; their work is integrally concerned with exploring the different ways in which we sense space at various scales, from the body to the landscape. Firstly, I focus on how the *Skyspaces* of James Turrell isolate the qualities of daylight that are usually neglected in the ambient visual array of the everyday, while also exploring how the equally ignored sky comes to prominence in considering the continuous effect of its light upon the vital landscape. Secondly, I look at Carlos Cruz-Diez's *Chromosaturation* to investigate the ocular and emotional responses to experiencing spaces saturated in monochrome, and explore the resonances of this work in foregrounding the non-representational qualities of everyday experience. Thirdly, I examine Olafur Eliasson's *Model for a Timeless Garden* to discuss how vision is constituted through a temporality specific to humans while also conjuring up a reconfigured experience of the sublime. Finally, I turn to a consideration of the sensual experience of darkness through a discussion of Tino Seghal's *This Variation*, a work that achieves its salience through the gradual adaptation of visitors to what initially appears to be a situation that takes place in a completely dark space. The social impacts and implications of this are underscored.

James Turrell –seeing with daylight

American artist James Turrell is renowned for experiments that explore light and perception. His early work focused on exploring the perceptual qualities of artificial illumination in interior environments, most notably, examining ocular responses to *ganzfelds*, unstructured, uniform fields of colour that gradually changed over time. Viewers questioned whether they were experiencing an effect of their own retina that itself produced these saturated fields, or whether they were correctly discerning a homogeneous field of coloured light at a distance from their eyes (Beveridge, 2000). It was difficult for viewers to ascertain whether these vibrant colour fields were right in front of them or further away, or whether their eyes were generating the effects of light and colour they witnessed. In addition, viewers also became aware of what seemed to be a decrease in intensity of colour as they gazed upon these pieces over time, causing uncertainty as to whether the colour itself was changing or the eye was adapting to what it saw, as I will explore below in the works of Carlos Cruz Diez. Such questions about visual perception, along with other issues, are raised by the works over which Turrell has focused much of his attention over the past two decades, his skyspaces. Here, I examine a particular skyspace, installed in 2000 and sited on a rocky outcrop in Northumbria's Kielder Forest in the North of England, a commercial space that has recently served as a site for art installations as part of a programme devised to attract tourists to the area.

The Skyspace at Kielder Forest, situated a mile and a half from the nearest metalled road, takes the form of a broad, 20 feet high tower built out of local stone. There is an exterior entrance to a passage that leads to a circular chamber. A concrete bench surrounds the inner circumference of the chamber and a circle of small, dark pebbles line the centre of its floor. A lower wall painted grey, is detached from the wall like a thick skin, and rises at an outward angle to some 8 feet, whereupon a higher wall reaches to the ceiling, at an angle that leans towards the perpendicular. It joins the ceiling which covers an area of some three feet at which point is cut a perfectly circular aperture with a very sharp edge, open to the sky. The radiance of the sky, at all times of day, contrasts with the lower light levels in the interior and its dynamism, depth and luminosity with the flat surface of the ceiling.

The sheer luminosity of the colour that occupies the sharp-edged circular opening dominates the experience of being inside the structure, attracting a focus on the brilliant light to the extent that it occasionally appears to constitute a solidity at variance with the usual apprehension that the sky and the air that it contains is immaterial. The apparent thickness of this concentrated light transforms our perception by isolating the medium with which we see: light. We are only seeing the light of the sky that lies outside the cairn, nothing else, but it is recontextualised so that it becomes the focus of attention instead of merely acting as the medium with which we see everything else. Though it is also the source of the interior illumination of the chamber, this is very much subservient to the brilliance and luminosity of the changing colours seen through the skyspace, the 'film of intense colour seemingly stretched across' this opening (Adcock, 1990: 2).

In directing focused attention on the light of the sky, Turrell fosters an unfolding apprehension of those light effects that are 'normally encrypted in the perceptual noise of the day-to-day and lost in the general disregard' (ibid: 206). In isolating it as an integral element of everyday experience in this way, Turrell makes 'visible light visible' (ibid: 208), detaching light from the general ambient array. However, whether we ever actually see light is a moot point amongst philosophers of perception. James Gibson, for instance, contends that we never see light itself, but rather the effects it has on the surfaces and textures in the landscape: colour, shade, and luminosity. For Gibson, the manifold textures of the land are specified by the agency of light while the sky is light refracted by innumerable particles in the atmosphere. However, as Tim Ingold (forthcoming) notes, this is to foreground the external effects of light as if it is an agency beyond our perception. As he contends, there can be 'no experience of light without the incidence of radiant energy, or without the excitation of photoreceptors in the retina, but as a quality of *affect* – of what it feels like to inhabit an illuminated world – light is reducible to neither'. Instead, and as Turrell's works so well exemplify, daylight is always both corporeal and celestial, in this instance in the affective mingling generated by the vibrant, changing luminous sky and the rapt attention of the viewer in the Skyspace. As in all cases of seeing, light 'gets inside and saturates our consciousness to the extent that it is constitutive of our own capacity to see or feel' (ibid). For me, the experience was a particularly focused affective and embodied encounter, crucially intensified by spending an hour and a half, mostly inside the structure. Becoming attuned to the shifting light and its effects depended upon this prolonged immersion.

In the Skyspace, by isolating light, Turrell skilfully reveals to us how visual perception is facilitated by the medium with which we perceive. As Ingold insists, 'to be able to see is to open to the experience of light' (ibid). Accordingly, like many other works by the artist, and the ganzfeld works discussed above, as Adcock asserts, Turrell's light works are 'so fundamentally integrated with perception that it becomes meaningless to separate the works from the physiological and psychological processes they disclose' (2000: 38). Skyspace is co-produced by viewers and the disclosure to them of the agencies of light. As the quote by Turrell that features on the Forestry Commission website advertising the work articulates, '(my) work is not so much about my seeing as about your seeing. There is no-one between you and your experience'. Indeed, I found it difficult to distinguish between the external - the actual colour and quality of the sky, which as I have explained, seems solid in form and close to the eyes and my own capacities for visual perception. As Adcock explicates, seeing colour and light in this way 'seems to come directly inside the percipient's own self-awareness' (ibid: 35).

In addition to this focus on the body, at a different scale, Turrell's skyspaces enjoin us to attend to the sky, and the landscape of which it is part. Occupying the chamber for a lengthy spell, I became acutely aware of the continuous variations in colours and intensity of the sky's light. The light in the Kielder Skyspace will continually shift

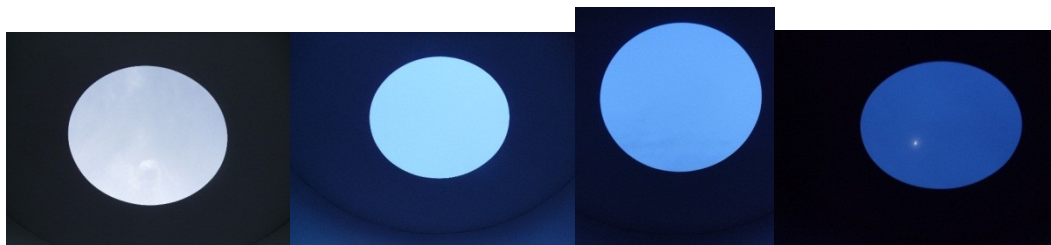
according to the angle of the sun, the time of day, the season and the prevailing weather conditions. Yet even under muted British weather conditions, whether flecked or thick with cloud, full of stars or midday blue, a succession of intense colours enchants the eyes and conditions the glow or gloom of the interior. Figure one exemplifies this dynamism: four views of the Skyspace were taken at twenty minute intervals towards the end of a winter afternoon. As dusk descends, the sky seems to become closer in contrast to the increasingly gloomy interior, and moonbeams tint particular sides of the chamber. Accordingly, as Georges Didi Huberman describes:

The sky is no longer the neutral background of things to be seen, but the active field of an unforeseeable visual experience... [T]he sky is no longer vaguely 'around' or 'above' us, but exactly there, on top of us and against us, present because it is changing, obliging us to inhabit it, if not to rise up to meet it (2001: 51)

By making the sky and light appear material and close to us, rather than extending in all directions to a great distance from us, the Skyspace challenges us to focus more profoundly upon the sky's qualities, fostering a mindful, even intimate connection. As Ingold (forthcoming) declares, the sky is neither homogeneous nor empty but swirls with currents that distribute light, colour, wind and cloud. Thus we see with the sky, with its luminosity and colour. Accordingly, this draws attention to the ways in which the sky has been neglected in conceptions of landscape, for the very word seems to exclude the celestial, focusing upon that which is of the earth, on landforms, contours and configurations, geomorphologies, natural histories, cultural inscriptions and distinctive features of particular kinds of *terra firma*, perpetuating a spatial 'horizontalism' (Graham and Hewitt, 2012). Yet the land is not 'an interface' separating earth and sky but a 'vaguely defined zone of admixture and intermingling' (Ingold, 2011: 119).

In the Skyspace, sky becomes the focus of an intensified attention that is uncommon when it forms part of the general visual array. This focus draws attention to the sky as an integral element in the landscape, part of its currents, circulations and emergences. The intensity of gazing at the luminous celestial circle caused me to venture outside the skyspace to ease the visual effects of the strong light, and look instead at the landscape surrounding the cairn. At this point, I became immediately aware of the absence of the (rest of the) landscape in the changing circle of light inside, and this foregrounded the agency of the sky and its light and its ineluctable shaping of the visual perception of landscape. In seeing light in a focused form, not typically, as it tints and tinctures the landscape, we acknowledge the centrality of light to perception and thus to our perception of the landscape, in which light reflects, is absorbed, deflects and refracts off the textures of the earth and its multiple features. The landscape is continuously animated by the changing light that falls upon it and would be indiscernible by sight without it.

Thus the Skyspace is intimately connected to the landscape of which it is part, and revelatory of its visual qualities. After being confronted by the overwhelming experience of light and sky in the chamber, walking outside attunes us to the myriad ways in which light continuously modulates this specifically Northern forest landscape. During my visit, from the vantage point of the viewpoint adjacent to the Skyspace, the light bestowed a uniformly dense, dark green upon the swathe of forest as far as the eye could see, and Kielder Reservoir resembled a flat, metallic sheet. Yet a sudden burst of sunlight through the thick cloud disaggregated the arboreal mass into a more variegated range of green hues, picking out distinctive clusters and even a few individual trees. In places, the water shone and sparkled. As evening approached and the sun descended, longer shadows were carved across space, imposing strict contrasts, and as the light dimmed, horizons and nearby trees were starkly rendered in silhouette.



In gazing upon the landscape after visiting the Skyspace, we may become more aware of what Alphonso Lingis (1998) refers to as the *levels* of light through which we attune and re-attune to the landscape, being successively drawn to certain colours within particular settings in which they stand out, scrutinising things close by or gazing towards the horizon or the sky. Light engenders continuous adaptation, provoking affective and emotional resonances, cajoling bodies into movement, activating passions, instigating sensual pleasures and discomforts.

Our responses to the swirling energies of light, along with recognition of how it continuously causes innumerable responses amongst the other sentient beings and non-sentient elements, foregrounds the role that light plays in the vitality of landscape. Disavowing sedentarist understandings that construe landscape as something that can be understood and classified from a detached viewpoint, landscapes are forever emergent, always in process, alive with multiple energies and rhythms (Bender 2001: 3). Moreover, as should be evident from the discussion of the relationship between the human perception of light and its celestial properties, the landscape inextricably blends distinctions between outside and inside, between the looked upon and the onlooker (Wylie, 2005) as part of the currents and energies of a world-in-formation. Plunged into light, bodies are situated in the continuous and generative becoming of the world, and any sense of a discrete embodied condition separate from this realm is deceptive, despite persistent forms of cultural representation that produce meanings about landscapes. As creatures within this unfolding world, landscape thus constitutes 'the materialities and sensibilities with

which we see' (Rose and Wylie, 2006: 478), of which light is a key element, rather than a static pictorialism (Saito 2008).

Finally, while I found the work to be productive of reflexive concern with the propensities of my own perception, and generative of mood shifts and emotional states ranging from relaxation to deep pleasure towards the changing qualities of the light, I want to acknowledge that the Skyspace can be apprehended in many other ways. Saskia Warren shows how audiences interpret and engage with Turrell's work, as with that of any artist, in multiple ways. Especially since this work is outside the gallery, it lies beyond the influence of authoritative curatorial discourses, aesthetics and tastes and therefore, the varied 'social, performative and affective capabilities' of the work (2013: 94) are opened up. Saito (2011) construes Turrell's Skyworks as emphasising the 'emptiness' foregrounded in Buddhist philosophy, articulating the impermanence and non-indivisibility which is the property of all things. We might also foreground acoustics, the communality enacted by visitors or the architectural qualities of the piece, for as Frank Vodvarka (2007) contends, such other sensory experiences may disrupt or coincide with visual absorption into colour and light. Indeed, the interior of the Skyspace rings with the echoes of sounds made by visitors or catches and amplifies birdsong, wind or the buzz of an aeroplane from outside.

Carlos Cruz-Diez: seeing with colour

In further investigating the human perception of colour and light, I now turn to consider the work of Venezuelan artist Carlos Cruz-Diez, more specifically, his work *Chromosaturation*, which featured at the Hayward Gallery's Light Show in 2013. This installation consists of three large interconnected rooms, each completely monochrome, saturated in purely blue, green and red lights courtesy of fluorescent tube lights with coloured filters. For me, and for others with whom I discussed the experience, the colour in each room seems to take on a solid materiality, divorcing single colour from its usual contexts in which it forms one of multiple shades and hues in a scene. Situating oneself in the centre of any of these chambers is to be immersed in a single, luminous, three dimensional colour field in which floor, walls and ceiling seem to meld in one pulsating, all-encompassing hue that pervades all scales of visual apprehension and confuses them.

In these unstructured, undifferentiated colour fields of blue, green and red, the eye is troubled, finding it difficult to focus on anything and straining from the glare. The retina is especially shocked when it moves into a chamber of a different colour from the one left behind. Human vision is never used to confronting scenes in which only one colour exists. When Lingis discusses the levels of light that allure and repel the gaze, he is thinking of the play of light and colour across an array of distinctive elements, and the ways in which discretely coloured objects tincture others within a visual field. Perhaps this sheer unfamiliarity derives from it being evolutionarily unnecessary for humans to apprehend monochromatic scenes. Yet in

Chromosaturatation, the visual system adapts to this strange situation. For after several seconds of blinking into the overwhelming monochrome, the room slowly turns a paler version of red, blue or green - to pink, sky blue or light green. At first, the impression is that this transformation in the light is being manipulated from outside, yet it is the observer who is moderating the colour in order to see with it more comfortably. Disconcertingly, no matter how hard I tried to concentrate in preventing this shift, it was impossible. Yet following this ocular adjustment, a movement from one room to another once more repeats the sensation of being enveloped by an overwhelming hue, until the visual system again amends perception and tones it down. The exhibit thus starkly makes us aware of the processes through which we receive and experience light. If our perceptual apparatus is able to change what it is that we experience at first hand, then what in our vision is reliable? Can we be sure that what we are seeing is the 'right' colour, or is our brain playing tricks on us?

In destabilising our sense of colour perception, Cruz-Diez challenges the unreflexive ways in which we apprehend the world through colour and foregrounds the particular human qualities of vision. For the perception of colour does not objectively recognise what is out there but is rather a subjective process through which the brain makes sense of the stimuli produced by light as it enters the eye and reacts with various kinds of cones, the photoreceptors in the eye that respond to light conditions. Apprehension of colour then, echoing Ingold's point about the betweenness of light discussed above, is forged through the relationalities between living creatures and their environments – the light and the things that it animates for us. Colours cannot exist independently but as Beveridge states, 'are relational, rather than intrinsic' (2000: 312), are a product of the electro-magnetic spectrum and visual perception. Crucially, humans see colours differently from each other. This is most obviously the case with the colour blind but also those who dwell in particular environments that shape subjective colour perception.



This powerfully reminds us that as well as seeing the world through symbolic and cognitive meanings, we are constrained and enabled by the specifically human visual capacities with which we are endowed. Firstly, it highlights that what we sense is subject to continual modulation and as we move through particular environments, we continuously attune ourselves to the shifting levels of light that pervades them, as Lingis suggests, whether consciously or unconsciously. Secondly, as I will discuss subsequently, this partial experience of colour draws attention to the particularities of human vision. Although they cannot be sure, colour scientists have investigated the cones in animals' eyes to suggest that cats and dogs are unable to distinguish as broad a spectrum of colours as humans, while fish and reptiles can probably see a greater range of hues. Most nocturnal creatures have little need of colour vision, while birds and other creatures can see the ultra-violet light that is invisible to humans. This radical otherness is part of what characterises the unknowability of the sensual and perceptual life of the dog, bird or insect. It is simply beyond our comprehension for even if we can manage to understand the mechanics of animal optics, we cannot know how an animal's visual apparatus interprets what it sees.

The illusionary and destabilising effects upon vision offered up by Cruz-Diez chime with the work of post-war kinetic artists, who according to Simon Rycroft, deployed light in ways that resonate with contemporary concerns to foreground the vitality of the material world. These artists moved away from representational forms: for them, 'ideas and relationships figure more prominently than schematic representations of nature and landscape' (2012: 455). Particularly concerned with exploring fields of dynamic energies and their effects upon perception, Rycroft considers how the meanings and feelings of such pieces emerged 'in the space-time between and in conjunction with the embodied viewer-participant and were at once a psychic,

physical and haptic experience' (ibid: 456). In *Chromosaturaton*, the experience of light and colour similarly foregrounds their dynamic qualities and the ways in which these energies interact with our own vital responses, producing physical responses to the overwhelming colour saturation and subsequent adaptation. Rycroft also considers how the op art of the 1960s was 'a generator of perceptual responses, possessing a dynamic quality which provoked illusory images and sensations in the spectator, thus bringing into doubt the "normal processes of seeing"' (2005: 355) and focusing attention on the perceptual capacities of human vision.

Yet although there are no obvious representational elements in the work, nothing to evoke any evident meaning, *Chromosaturaton* does provoke emotional and affective responses. For colours are also a stimulus for emotional conditions and the supercharged hues here evoke different, indescribable moods as they suffuse vision and tint our skin and clothes. As Tim Ingold (forthcoming) avers, 'as a phenomenon of light, colour lends a particular affectivity to the sensible world: an aura that overwhelms the consciousness of those who come under its influence'. The red, green and blue experienced in these separate chambers solicit diverse moods in their initially vibrant state, and then these affects alter as the colours become paler. For the visitors to whom I spoke, the blue conjured up a sense of melancholy while for me, the light green generated a sense of calmness, and I tended to linger in this room, while only spending a limited time in the red chamber. It seemed as if similar colour-induced feelings may have inspired movement between the different rooms, engendering continuous perceptual adjustment and emotional variation as well as a chance to experience the merging and overlapping of colours that strike further emotional resonances. Colour and light, the work underscores, facilitate how the ongoing perception of the world is entangled with affect and emotion.

Olafur Eliasson seeing in time

Seeing mountains and waters has differences depending on the species. That is to say, there are those who see water as jewel necklaces... their jewel necklaces we see as water. There are those who see water as beautiful flowers... (Dogen, cited in Saito, 2008: 158)

Like Cruz-Diez, Olafur Eliasson is concerned with dematerialising the art object, whether by deploying light, water or mist and diffusing these elements into space to explore the perception of the onlooker. In so doing, he makes us question how we perceive, intervening in our usual unreflexive sensing of the world by diverging from the conventions through and by which we see, thereby revealing such norms.

The exquisite *Model for a Timeless Garden* (2011) by Eliasson was another exhibit that was part of the Hayward's Light Show, but it solicited a different range of ideas about sensation and light to Cruz-Diez's display, and possessed a very different affective charge. In Eliasson's piece, visitors walked into an otherwise dark room to

see, exhibited on a long table at waist height, an arrangement of 27 small fountains of varying flow and height, a strobe light pulsing to freeze frame them. The water, usually experienced as continuous flow under ordinary light conditions, was transformed into lines of movement composed of diamonds and jewels, suspended in mid flow, facilitating a unique perception of water beyond the usual human visual capacities. As the artist explains, the effect is to 'freeze something that usually our eye and brain would see in motion, so the film through which we see the world is cut into small sections' (Phaidon, 2013). This dissection of the visual world into discrete moments by the strobe is made more peculiar because the continuous flow of the sound of running water is not matched by the usual visual apprehension of running water.



This auditory-visual mismatch draws attention to how we see according to the temporal constraints imposed by our visual system. As Sorensen (2004) details, when we watch a movie, anything below a speed of 16 frames per second can cause the apprehension of flashing images rather than a continuous flow. The low threshold of visual persistence amongst humans mean that we can see a film – usually operated at 24 frames a second - as a continuous flow, although other animals, such as a bee, would perceive the separateness of each frame. The unfamiliar perception of flowing water in *Timeless Garden* might thus cause us to question how other creatures may perceive water – whether they apprehends it as a variegated but ongoing visual flow like we usually do or are able to perceive the separate drops that are made evident in Eliasson's display.

Through producing an experience in which there is a collapse of meaning between our expectations and our previous perceptual experience, suggesting that the boundary between reality and illusion is less clear than we envisaged, the limits of

our vision and its partiality are revealed. Yet the work also offers an alternative way of visually perceiving the world – a way of seeing that might be akin to that of another creature. As curator Madeleine Grynsztejn writes, ‘in promoting a kind of awareness of conventions of seeing, Eliasson’s work encourages a critical attitude toward normative processes of perception while at the same time offering viewers opportunities to expand their ability to envision’ (2007: 17).

Helen Frichot describes how, in an earlier experiment, Eliasson arranged for ‘a circling ring of blue dots’ to be projected onto a wall. Gradually, onlookers gradually came to see orange smudges, an afterglow that was a ‘perceptual illusion created by the passage of blue’. Yet Frichot underscores how each spectator may apprehend and feel such scenes differently, each contributing to the ‘percepts and affects of the event’ in slightly different ways but through a shared, affective negotiation of perception ‘that allow the subject to recognise his or her subjectivity in transformation’ (2008: 34).

Similarly, in *Timeless Garden*, we wonder whether other visitors are seeing the fountains as we see them. The hushed gasps and unobtrusive exclamations of those entering the room for the first time suggest that they are equally stunned by the diverse formations of the auratic frozen water, the sounds and the presence of others. The flashing light, the dark setting and the mesmerising fountains induce quiet, a focused absorption and slower physical movements to constitute a shared multi-sensual space. Viewing the work is thus an irreducibly social experience, and sharing in the glee decentres the self from the experience, yet all the same, we try to make sense of our own perception. Accordingly, the work produces an alternate interweaving of social connectedness and contemplative detachment.

The production of this collective absorption foregrounds how the elements that Eliasson uses in his art – light, air and water - are the elements that contribute to a sense of the sublime in landscape, for instance, in landscape painting and nature tourism. The elements of the sublime are reassembled in the gallery, producing a sense of being overwhelmed, connoting immensity and the unknowable, or the mysteries and grandeur of the divine. This recontextualisation of natural elements to create rainbows, suns, fountains and mists confuses us about our conventional apprehensions and representations of nature. Eliasson acknowledges this staging of the sublime in his declaring about *Timeless Garden* that ‘there is something... which is both exciting - quite lovely actually - and also somewhat threatening’ (Phaidon, 2013). Even though these elements are staged through clearly evident technological means, the power of the work is not diminished. Nevertheless, the strategy succeeds in producing an awareness of how we construe symbolic meanings and respond emotionally to the raw materials and effects he deploys.

Tino Seghal – seeing in the dark, producing conviviality

The final work I explore, Tino Seghal's *This Variation*, was part of Manchester's 2013 International Festival, and in contradistinction to the three works discussed above which focus on immediate encounters with light and the questions of perception that surround it, relied upon the ability of the eye's rod cells to gradually become accustomed to seeing in the dark. The location was a now disused part of Piccadilly Train Station, the semi-derelict Mayfield Depot, which stored and dispatched parcels from within cavernous interior that was opened up as a temporary venue for festival shows and installations. Visitors entered the echoing interior of the premises and after crossing a huge hall, were guided along a short passageway to a room. Inside, all was completely dark, save for a vague glow above. The room's dimensions and planes were impossible to guess, and I imagined that it possessed areas that sloped, with perhaps sudden drops bounded by railings. In the absence of light, the mind imagines all sorts of things, must conjure up a semblance of that which cannot be perceived. In the pitch black, we suddenly became aware of chirruping noises all around us, and then sonorous voices accompanied these sounds, along with an array of other sound effects. In the absence of light, awareness of these noises was intensified. They seemed to be recorded and animated the darkness with a liveliness that had been initially absent upon entry. Yet gradually, my eyes began to become accustomed to the gloom. At first, only vague shadowy forms could be ascertained, but gradually the flat, square shape of the room became apparent, refuting my imaginary construction, and then the figures took on more substantial form. Magically, eyes became attuned to the darkness, and it became evident that many of the figures in the room were responsible for the sounds and, I then noticed, movements as well. The ever-changing soundscape shifted from acapella singing to better known songs, occasionally giving way to spoken words. Subsequently, a romantic slow song was the trigger for the dancers to gently draw close to the visitors, embracing them in a slow dance. After becoming accustomed to the gloom, it was comical to watch new arrivals, edging blindly into the room, arms outstretched, as those who had stayed for a while became part of the event, joining in the dance, responding to those who gently solicited them.

The most immediate experience of the work is that it is a confrontation with darkness, a condition with which few urban dwellers are familiar. Before the 18th century, after nightfall, life was lived primarily in the dark, with perhaps a few feeble candles to keep it at bay, and bodies tended to be attuned to manoeuvring in the dark, sensing space through smell, touch and sound (Edensor, 2013). Today however, in an over-illuminated west, darkness of this depth is rarely encountered, and so at first, there is a certain thrill in stepping into a setting in which nothing can be visually detected. The work first then, relies on the power of darkness to disrupt, even shock a body unfamiliar with it. Moreover, in the dark, awareness of non-visual sensations becomes heightened, touch, smell and sound pressing in on consciousness where they may ordinarily be unrecognizable. This is why the body suddenly becomes attuned to the strange sounds that permeate the all-encompassing blackness.

As we come to realise however, in *This Variation*, the darkness is not total, and the light attached to the ceiling of the room enables us to see most essential details after 15 to 20 minutes, the time it usually takes the rod cells in the eye, specialised in discerning the world in the gloom, to adjust, replacing the work of the eye's cone cells, which enable us to see the detail and colour of daylight. As Nina Morris insists, darkness is 'situated, partial and relational' (2011: 316), varying from pitch blackness to an array of various shady and shadowy conditions.

Sorensen (2004) claims that we do not see nothing in the dark; instead, even as we strain to see any faint detail, we continuously see darkness, and see with darkness, even if we discern only an overwhelming blackness. He further maintains that this darkness has depth, for if a light was discernible at some distance, we would be able to assess its proximity to us. Yet because the room in Mayfield Depot is not wholly dark, Seghal's work plays with our ability to adapt to very - though not completely - dark conditions, a visual propensity which is revealed to us over the duration of the time we spend in the room.

This gradual revelation of the scene, revealed as a community of interpreters and visitors, is utterly crucial to the success of the piece. Visitors who were slowly introduced into a fully lit space in which all was visible, where interpreters were transparently singing and dancing, would likely shrink from the scene in embarrassment, or watch uneasily at the proceedings from the side-lines. Even more, foreknowledge of dancing and being hugged may well have induced strong discomfort in anticipation of such intimate physical contact. However, as visitors only gradually become aware what is happening in their midst, they seem disarmed, even charmed, by the subtle interactions that take place. They can choose to engage or not and are never co-opted forcefully but have the time to make that choice.

In designing events such as this, Tino Seghal is guided by an anti-materialistic ethos, moving away from the display of art objects and towards human interaction, creating 'constructed situations'. To avoid commodification, he explicitly prohibits any images to be taken and disseminated and thus the event exists solely in the mind and memory of the participants. The pieces may involve dozens of 'interpreters' – labelled as such by Seghal in contradistinction to 'performers' (Levine, 2013: 71). For Seghal, performance, 'not only connotes a scripted, choreographed program designed to enact a specific agenda, but it also often seeks to maintain distance between performer and participant' (Metzger, 2013: 4), whereas interpreters develop a particular approach to the event following the loose instructions of the artist.

In his works, Seghal questions the 'borders between public and private space; documentary and fictional approaches; references to historical precedents; material and immaterial components of a work of art; lived and scripted "experiences"' (Patrick, 2011: 69). The pieces seem to belong to what Nicolas Bourriaud refers to as 'relational artworks' (Downey, 2007), devised to produce social experiences and/or new forms of sociability, perhaps as here, through devising scenarios where

participants learn to share and take part in a temporary collective. The crucial element in *This Variation* is the initial perception of darkness, for initially visitors are alone, guessing about what is going on, and only gradually come to belong to a community. In this sense, darkness opens up the potential for physical and affective communication that 'dismantles the traditionally passive role of the viewer and the static condition of the artwork' (Metzer, 2013: 4), constituting a social experience forged in interaction between visitors, interpreters and space. In discussing plays staged in the dark, Martin Welton claims that the 'visual experience of darkness is one of proximity' (2013: 5) as a sense of distance between the observer, and other people and space diminishes, 'who or what others may be becomes less fact, than possibility' (ibid: 6), thereby drawing reflexive attention to the usual conditions of perception. And the speculations and misapprehensions that the darkness initially engenders are brought into focus by the subsequent perceptual awareness about what is going on.

The event is not purely non-representational, for it is also crucial to consider the symbolic specificities of the venue chosen by Seghal for his work, for the Mayfield Depot was closed in 1986, before which it was animated by workers, machines and noise. This usually deserted, ghostly interior has been temporarily re-animated by human bodies, though according to different practices, aims and sensations, recalling its former inhabitation.

In *This Variation*, darkness is highly productive, essential to the experience of the work. It accompanies a growing, diverse range of dark experiences that promote different modes of sensuality and sociability, including dark sky parks (Edensor, 2014), plays and concerts held in the dark, and restaurants in which food is served in total darkness (Edensor and Falconer, 2014). Despite its associations with devilry, danger and irrationality (Koslovsky, 2011), these examples disclose how darkness can serve as 'a conduit for new forms of conviviality and camaraderie (Gallen and Gibson, 2011: 2514).

Conclusion

The four pieces discussed in this article address issues of sensation and perception in very different ways, but collectively, they focus on the ways in which the normative apprehension of the world can be interrogated and the human particularities of vision elucidated. Whether through exploring the effects of the light of the sky, the impact of colour and light, the temporality of vision or the ways in which we apprehend darkness, all the works make dramatic interventions into the usual experience of art by foregrounding the perception of the viewer. This challenge to perception undergirds the vitality of light in the broader vital constitution of the world and in human experience. Under these conditions and others, we see *with* the infinite variations of light and dark, according to its levels, and this relationship to light mediates between the internal and external. All these works reveal the spatial and temporal contexts through which light and dark are perceived and sensed. The size

of the space in which perception occurs is foregrounded, from the body's visual system to the small room; from the seemingly boundless space of an indistinguishable colour field to the extending landscape. Perception also depends upon the temporal engagement with these pieces. A prolonged period spent in the Skyspace is rewarded by an emerging awareness of the shifting qualities of the light of the sky, while the impact of Eliasson's work is more immediate. By contrast, *This Variation* requires one to stay for the time it takes the eyes to attune to darkness, while *Chromosaturatation* causes regular movement between the differently coloured rooms and after a while visual fatigue encourages visitors to move on.

It is difficult to capture the sheer sensory power of experiencing each of these works. This reveals that for all these pieces, their non-representational impacts are likely to efface the quest for meaning; their affective and emotional effects are liable to dominate experience. Yet though the perceptual overpowers the conceptual, as I have shown, this is never entirely occluded, for in each of the pieces, the work can be interpreted variously in terms of the contexts raised by their settings or through a host of other associations.

In vividly disclosing the particularity of our human visual perception, encouraging a self-conscious speculation about the accuracy of what we perceive, the partial and illusory qualities of our visual system, we are caused to speculate upon whether others see as we see. How might the colour blind or partially sighted see the world? And even more strangely, how do animals see in and with light and darkness. How do they ascertain the flow of things – as a blur or a segmented array? Upon what do they focus? What colours are they able to discern and what elements of the electromagnetic spectrum are they able to perceive that are beyond our senses? Can they make their way in the dark or are their movements thwarted?

Yuriko Saito draws attention to Dewey's contention about the moral function of art: 'to remove prejudice, do away with the scales that keep the eye from seeing, tear away the veils due to wont and custom [and] perfect the power to perceive' (2011: 152), a contention that is germane to the work discussed here. For in revealing the specificities of human perception, these works disrupt what Rancière (2004) calls the distribution of the sensible by making light available for more focused concentration than is usual, particularly in contexts where perception is blurred by confronting the blizzard of light produced in urban space that is designed to capture attention and produce regimes of ordering. The ways in which light is deployed across space extend aesthetics beyond the realm of art, devising illumination that serves the needs of bureaucracies, security organisations and commercial interests in normalising our actions, perceptions and ideas about the illuminated cityscape

Thus these works also ask how we might detach perception from culture. Constance Claessen has written that we see in particular cultural, social and historical contexts: 'we not only think *about* our senses, we think *through* them' (1993: 9), according to norms which prescribe what is sensually desirable and acceptable, for 'sensory

values not only frame a culture's experience, they express its ideals, its hopes and its fears'. While the works of Turrell, Cruz-Diez, Eliasson and Seghal all perhaps initially offer experiences of what in describing the world newly revealed to the blind, Dillard (1974: 27) calls 'pure sensation unencumbered by meaning', or what Merleau-Ponty (1962: ix) describes as a 'return to things themselves... to that world which precedes knowledge', through their unfamiliarity, affective impact and revelations about perception, they also offer the potential to critique the distribution of that which is visually sensible.

- Adcock, C. (1990) *James Turrell: The Art of Light and Space*, Berkeley: University of California Press
- Bender, B. (2001) 'Introduction', in B. Bender and M. Winer (eds) *Contested Landscapes: Movement, Exile and Place*, Oxford: Berg
- Benjamin, W. (1997) *One Way Street and Other Writings*, London: Verso
- Beveridge, P. (2000) 'Color perception and the art of James Turrell', *Leonardo*, 33 (4): 305-313
- Claessen, C. (1993) *Worlds of Sense: Exploring the Senses in History and Across Cultures*, London: Routledge
- Didi-Huberman, G. (2001) 'The fable of the place', in J. Turrell, P. Noever and D. Birnbaum (eds) *James Turrell: The Other Horizon*, New York: Hatje Kantz
- Dillard, A. (1974) *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, New York: Perennial Library
- Downey, A. (2007) 'Towards a politics of (relational) aesthetics', *Third Text*, 21(3): 267-275,
- Edensor, T. (2013) 'Reconnecting with Darkness: experiencing landscapes and sites of gloom', *Social and Cultural Geography* 14(4): 446-465
- Edensor, T. (2014) 'The gloomy city: rethinking the relation between light and dark' *Urban Studies*, published online: DOI: 10.1177/0042098013504009
- Edensor, T. and Falconer, E. (2014) 'Eating in the dark: sensation and conviviality in a lightless place Dans Le Noir?', *Cultural Geographies*, online: DOI: 10.1177/1474474014534814
- Forestry Commission, Recreation, Kielder Forest, Skyspace,
<http://www.forestry.gov.uk/forestry/EnglandNorthumberlandKielderKielderKielderCastleForestParkCentreSkyspace> (accessed, 31/5/14)
- Frichot, H. (2008) '[Olafur Eliasson and the circulation of affects and percepts: in conversation](#)', *Architectural Design*, 78(3): 30-35
- Gallan, B. and Gibson, C. (2011) Commentary: new dawn or new dusk? Beyond the binary of night and day, *Environment and Planning A*, 43(11): 2509-2515
- Graham, S. and Hewitt, L. (2012) 'Getting off the ground: on the politics of urban verticality', *Progress in Human Geography*, online first
- Grynsztejn, M. (2007) '(Y)our entanglements: Olafur Eliasson, the museum and consumer culture' in M. Grynsztejn (ed) *Take Your Time: Olafur Eliasson*, London: San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, Thames and Hudson

Ingold, T. (2011) *Being Alive: Essays on Movement, Knowledge and Description*, London: Routledge

Ingold, T. (forthcoming) Reach for the stars: light, vision and the atmosphere. In *The Imagined Sky: Cultural Perspectives*, ed. Darrelyn Gunzburg. Sheffield: Equinox.

Koslofsky, C. (2011) *Evening's Empire: A History of Night in Early Modern Europe*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

Levine, A. (2013) 'Being a thing: the work of performing in the museum', *Women and Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory*, 23(2): 291–303,

Lingis, A. (1998) *Foreign Bodies*, Bloomington, In: Indiana University press

Merleau-Ponty, M. (1962), *Phenomenology of Perception*, London: Routledge and Kegan-Paul.

Metzger, C. (2013) 'Building something out of nothing (or vice versa) in Tino Sehgal's *This Progress*, http://www.cylemetzger.com/metzger_sehgal_progress.pdf (accessed, 12/3/14)

Morris, N. (2011) Night walking: darkness and sensory perception in a night-time landscape installation, *Cultural Geographies* 18(3): 315 –342

Patrick, M. (2011) 'Performative tactics and the choreographic reinvention of public space', *Arts and the Public Sphere*, 1(1): 65–84

Phaidon (2013) 'Olafur Eliasson's strobe-lit fountains come to London', <http://au.phaidon.com/agenda/art/articles/2013/january/29/olafur-eliassons-strobe-lit-fountains-come-to-london/> (accessed, 05/05/14)

Rancière, J. (2004) *The Politics of Aesthetics: Distribution of the Sensible*, London: Continuum

Rose, M. and Wylie, J. (2006) 'Animating landscape', *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 24: 475-479

Rycroft, S. (2005) 'The nature of op art: Bridget Riley and the art of nonrepresentation', *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 23: 351-371

Rycroft, S. (2012) 'Art and micro-cosmos: kinetic art and mid-20th-century cosmology', *Cultural Geographies*, 19(4): 447-467

Saito, Y. (2008) 'Appreciating nature on its own terms', in A. Carlson and S. Lintott (eds) *Nature, Aesthetics and Environmentalism: From Beauty To Duty*, New York: Columbia.

Saito, Y. (2011) 'The aesthetics of emptiness: sky art', *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 29: 499-518, 20(1)

Sorensen, R. (2004) 'We see in the dark', *Nous*, 38(3): 456-480

Vodvarka, F. (2007) 'Midwest skyscape', *Senses and Society*, 2(1): 87-92

Warren, S. (2013) 'Audiencing James Turrell's *Skyspace*: encounters between art and audience at Yorkshire Sculpture Park', *Cultural Geographies*, 20(1): 83-102

Welton, M. (2013) 'The possibility of darkness: blackout and shadow in Chris Goode's *Who You Are*', *Theatre Research International*, 38(1): 4 – 19

Wylie, J. (2005) 'A single day's walking: narrating self and landscape on the Sputh Coast path', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 30: 234-247