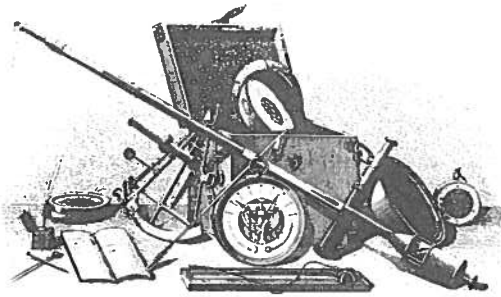


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Mapping Spaces

A TOPOLOGICAL SURVEY OF THE WORK

BY JAMES TURRELL



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ICONOGRAPHIA COELESTIS

Mario Diacono

Roden Crater, its above ground form remolded, its underground spaces yet to be worked on, has already been converted by James Turrell into one of the most memorable American cultural icons. The project goes beyond the existential/formal concept of the volcano's transformation, for it also consists of the volcano itself as a sublime, natural 'sign,' one which can be interpreted as a vehicle for art. Seen from above, the rosy concavity of the low, wide cone appears like a planetary uterus, issued forth from the earth of the Painted Desert. It is like an emblem of cosmic birth, with just a memory of stone and sand remaining. Yet, in the first engraving of the *Deep Sky* portfolio, in which Turrell depicts the nocturnal aspects of the Crater, the volcano appears like Hokusai's Fuji, the slopes covered in shadows rather than snow. It is an erection extending upward to wed the sky and the earth, but with its female matrix hidden within its summit. Just as it has a below ground and an above ground aspect, the project also has daytime and nighttime regimes, the crater being experienced differently as the time of day changes. *Deep Sky* is really an imaginary map of the nocturnal regime that might take place. The seven black and white engravings convey the interaction of darkness and light during the night. Breaks in the crater's exterior bring the natural light from the night sky into the interior, while the various spaces within are all illuminated by either moonlight or by artificial light. The portfolio's title, *Deep Sky*, is an oxymoron, expressing the coexistence of complex multiple experiences. 'Deep,' with its connotation of darkness, pertains to the underground realm, while 'Sky,' with its connotation of light, implies the above ground realm. However, the concept of 'depth' also evokes the idea of 'space,' and space and light are, and always have been, the 'materials' of Turrell's work. A specific element of sculptural materiality comes into play in the Roden Crater project, giving the work a hyper-historical dimension. This element is the volcano as a gigantic 'readymade' (in the Duchampian/conceptual sense of the term) of volcanic stone and ash, as a desert mountain, as a residual construction of eruptive/erective activity from 500,000 years ago, as an ancient American Indian habitat, as an elevated site from which one can imagine the horizon to be limitless.

Turrell deliberately forces us to question and expand our notion of art. Works of art are usually seen as the external projection of an internal event, one which the work itself has helped to generate with its historic desire. But it is only because of our awareness as spectators that the work receives the consecration of its desire to exist. Roden Crater, instead, appeals to our subjectivity on a level that

goes beyond psychological or cultural reflection, perceptual solicitation, or historical awareness. A sense of Being is forcibly revealed to us via a radical subversion of ourselves and our sense of being a body whose existence is tied to the surrounding world. Thus, it is *our* subjectivity, not that of the artist, that is the *telos* toward which the intention of the piece is directed. The art here is completed within our bodies, which become a place for hyper-historical joining of earth and sky and for hyper-conscious observation. In the *Divine Comedy*, Dante depicted a gigantic earth and sky performance, describing a work "to which both Heaven and Earth have set their hand" (Paradiso, XXV, 2). These same words might describe Roden Crater. Looking at the first phase (1974–1984), one could say that the *Deep Sky* portfolio performs the same function that Duchamp's *Boite Verte*, with its labyrinth of notes, diagrams, and mechanical drawings, did for his *Grand Verre*. The *Grand Verre*'s design and construction also lasted ten years (1913–23), and even then it was not finished. It is possible that some day Roden Crater will be seen as playing a similar role in relation to the art of its time. There is an obvious difference, however. In the *Grand Verre*, art kindles events within a mythical realm that is hermetically elaborated by Duchamp's subjectivity. The Roden Crater project, on the contrary, kindles the subjectivity of all who experience it, preparing the conditions for them to perceive the cosmic dimension. And while in Duchamp's work the god/maker of art occupies the deepest center of the work, Turrell, the god/artist, stays at the point furthest away from the work. After having created it, he is rendered invisible, like the builder of the Pyramids. It is this ideology that can reunite the most advanced contemporary thought on the historical completion of art with the initial praxis of a form that precedes art and that explores the advent of new cycles of Being.

Like Duchamp's *Grand Verre/Oeuvre*, the Roden Crater might also be defined as a formal machine, but again not from the point of view of the maker. Rather, it is the user who 'constructs' this machine, with his or her sensations and unconscious relationship to the environment radically subverted. The spaces envisioned in *Deep Sky* are an initial plan for such a machine: a long tunnel onto which six sculptural/architectural spaces (constituting the underground motor) open, and which then ends up in the reshaped concavity of the volcano's fumarole (the vent from which the gasses and vapors once issued forth). Here, the beginning of architecture meets the terminal stage of sculpture. Thus modified, the volcano becomes a specific architectural icon, and the quality of the celestial events that one perceives through it gives rise to a celestial iconography and to a phenomenology of light fields, which form within the consciousness of the observer. Sky and natural light are transformed into color and image; the volcano

becomes a space and light, earth and sky sculpture. Turrell himself described "the light that passes through the opening from one space to another as image" (*Arts Magazine*, May, 1984, p. 76). In the *Deep Sky* engravings the light that illuminates the underground spaces is allusively that of the moon. Symbolically speaking, one could say that it is Phanes, the Orphic light and the splendor that emanates from the night, which the initial god created after withdrawing into the heavens.

Roden Crater was chosen by Turrell as the focal point for his project because of its specific configuration (a high form, isolated in the desert, with a concave summit which could be modified into a reversal of the celestial vault). In other words, the site was chosen because its primary form perfectly allowed for the incorporation of archetypal spaces within it. The objective of the project can thus be delineated in the following terms: to complete an original site through the construction of structures that can generate, for those who experience the project, a sense of totality and of integration of one's subjectivity with the 'non-objective' world, that is, a world preceding or beyond the definition of objects. For an analogous reason, many of Turrell's early works have invented words as titles (*Laar, Iltar, Amba, Avar, Afrum, Shanta, Ondoe, Endu, Raemar*, etc.). With these, he was seeking a correspondence between sounds and unpredictable perceptual experiences that would indicate total self-referentiality. The title *Deep Sky* hints at a major experience envisioned in the etchings: that the work will allow the sentiment of depth, of sinking into oneself, which is being provoked by a heightened perception of the sky. Roden Crater comes to represent the terrestrial half of a sphere, some hundred meters in diameter, of which the dome of the celestial vault constitutes the other half. And while the reshaping of the fumarole acts to accentuate radically the curvature of the celestial vault, the 'light rooms' or performance spaces which will be excavated within the volcano will act to convey an unnatural truth: that the sky is flat, even while appearing spherical. These opposite perceptions — the sphericity and the flatness of the sky — are played off, one against the other, to the maximum. The extremity of this duality or ambiguity forces the observer to recognize the tension of the cosmos within his own body/consciousness. 'Cosmos' comes from the Greek *kosmos*, which originally designated the celestial sphere; the word later came to denote the order of the universe. Roden Crater allows us to experience intensely the cosmos through the subversion of the sky's (and the earth's) sphericity.

It would be both simplistic and misleading to group Roden Crater with the now vast number of 'earthworks' or to see it as the latest product of this 'genre.' While it apparently involves the sculptural elaboration of the earth and of the

landscape that usually characterizes an earthwork, its objectives completely transcend the simple molding of a volume of gigantic scale in order to indicate the art-ificial creation and dislocation of an object within nature. As it has already been noted, the project's plan calls for the construction of six 'skyworks' or 'space and light works' within an extinct volcano on the Painted Desert in northern Arizona. These will constitute a kind of mysteric passage. At the exit from the tunnel (about 400 meters long, onto which the six rooms open up), the passage will lead to the vast open space of the crater, which in itself will constitute a final, enormous skywork, an immense modified readymade, a concave, circular room for the radicalized perception of the curvature of both the earth's crust and the celestial vault. All the formal, technological, astronomical, historical, symbolical, and mythical values that regulated the construction of the work will enter into the consciousness and the being of those who complete the passage. These values will merge into an indescribable experience which, traversing the totality of the participant's body, will lead him to fully hyper-sense the space. In that moment, as Heraclitus stated, 'All men can come to perceive the nature of themselves and feel the immediacy.' Thus Roden Crater will be more than the *Spiral Jetty* of the '80s. It will have, according to its plan, an 'infernal' and an 'edenic' aspect. The long tunnel running past the six rooms will embody the infernal one, the descent to the underworld, the *nekya*. It will begin at a height of about 80 meters above ground level and will climb at a 7 degree slope up to the fumarole of the crater. Along the way, the sky will always be visible through the opening at the end of the tunnel.

One of the two skyworks completed in the Villa Panza at Varese, Italy, clearly prefigures this moment. There, at the left end of a barrel-vaulted corridor, are two rooms by Turrell: a 'light room' and a 'skywork,' both constructed in 1975-76. The corridor ends in a lunette, formed by a cut-out portion of the facing wall and by the arch of the vault above it. The vault of the entire corridor is illuminated by a continuous neon light running along the line of conjunction of walls and vault. During the day, the lunette frames an arc of blue sky, within which aerial events appear for a few seconds and are perceived by the eye as if they were part of a fresco. The passage of a cloud, the fleeting image of a crow, are extrapolated from nature and transferred for a few moments into the sky of art. The wall at the base of the arc was cut at a slant to allow a clear view of the semicircle of the lunette, and it is the structure of this cut that seems to allude to the effect planned by Turrell in the tunnel that will lead to the fumarole of the crater.

One of the six Roden Crater rooms will be the site of an even more vivid

symbol/icon of painting. This room was prefigured by the other skywork in the Panza Collection. There, the corridor with the lunette opens on the left into a square room, about four yards on each side. It immediately appears that the original dimensions of the room have been radically modified, so that the space is a disproportionately tall cube, with the ceiling exasperatingly far away. The walls, slightly tapered toward the top, are painted titanium white. At the bottom of the walls, a continuous light emanates from a groove containing neon tubes, hidden from view. This has the effect of negating any difference between night and day light. Light is always constant. The roof of the room has been completely cut away and replaced by a metallic frame, about twenty inches wide. The frame is painted white, but a different white from the walls, with its own, separate value. The frame encloses a perfect square of sky, the spherical nature of which is totally annulled. It appears like a stretched canvas, its color changing every fifteen minutes or so, and even more rapidly at dawn and dusk. External occurrences become thus depicted as a variety of two-dimensional events. During the nocturnal aspect of the piece, however, something very specific occurs. The neon bathes the room in a constant white, hot light, while the sky captured within the ceiling frame changes to a dense, morbid black, impenetrable except perhaps for the light of the single star Sirius that dances to the movement of the person who looks upward from within the room. That piece of sky, now revealed on a larger architectural scale, appears as the living epiphany of Malevich's black square. This skywork will find its reversal in one of the planned Roden Crater rooms, where the floor will have a surface of black obsidian, covered by a pool of water. During the day, the pool will reflect the sun and at night the moon. Through this piece one can understand Turrell's affirmation that 'the light in the room makes an image,' and that 'each of these spaces is sensitive to events in the sky.' But in the final instance, this sensitivity will be 'enacted' by the person who enters the room.

In Roden Crater's underground spaces, the negation of the curvature of the celestial vault is intended to make the transition to the successive experience of its sphericity an especially violent one. This occurs at the moment one passes from the narrow tunnel into the vastness of the fumarole. In the 'skyworks,' which result in a complete flattening of the sky, there is a total reversal of the meaning articulated by the Pantheon in Rome. There, a celestial aspect was introduced into the architecture, and a homology was declared between the vault of the sky and that of the temple. The round opening at the center of the Pantheon's dome is a convocation of the sky into the space, rather than its annulment. Turrell's rooms, instead, are places of contemplation for a single 'sky-

watcher' — ultimately the artist himself — rather than for a social group. But Turrell's room too brings to us the notion of temple. The words 'temple' and 'contemplation' come from the same root *tem*, which is also found in the Greek word *témenos* (first meaning 'sacred enclosure' and later meaning 'temple'). In Latin, *templum* initially denoted the part of the sky designated by the priest for reading auspices (*templum caeli*, the plural of which, *templa caeli*, came to denote, by extension, the entire celestial vault). By cutting out a square or an arc of sky from the roof or the wall of a closed space, Turrell has constructed an original *templum* for the contemporary observer. It is as though through the contemplation of form, the observer might read the auspices of art. If in one or more of the skyworks within the volcano the observer can recuperate the primitive experience and meaning of 'temple,' it is in the reshaping of the bowl of the crater (this word comes from the Greek *krater*, a vessel for pouring wine) and in the physical experiences of that space that the concepts of *kosmos* and *mundus* recapture also their archetypal import and meaning. The entire project thus becomes a living metaphor for the Orphic myth of the birth and death of the world. Both the Greek *kosmos* and its Latin correspondent *mundus* initially designated the celestial vault in movement and the sphere of the nine skies (macrocosm) that surrounded the earth. It was only later that *mundus* came to designate the earth with its inhabitants (microcosm). Furthermore, when the Romans founded a city they would excavate a *mundus*, a hemispherical cavity, at the center of the site. This was meant to establish a means of communication with the underground world. This infernal *mundus* (*mundus Cereris*) was understood as an imitation of the celestial *mundus* above. Thus, they recreated the initial image of the world as proposed in the Orphic myth, according to which the universe was first in the shape of an egg. With the birth of Phanes (the light), the egg separated into two equal halves: the upper part became the sky, the lower part the earth. An analogous *kosmos/mundus* can thus be seen in the reshaping of Roden Crater, with the mirroring of the earth's concavity in that of the sky, and the experiencing of the sphericity of both. The merging of these sensations/observations visually reshapes the original egg of the world.

Light, too, is an element in Turrell's work that is neither physical nor spiritual, but experiential. There will always be light in the underground rooms and in the tunnel. Day and night, the tunnel will have a combination of natural light (for the most part) and artificial light (in lesser proportion). The artificial light will be electrically generated from the rain water that accumulates in the crater and from the winds that hit the volcano from the northeast. In addition to the sky and the earth, to light, space, and color (the black ash of the volcanic subsoil

and the prevailing red of the landscape will both play a major visual role in the project), time will also be an important formal element. As it has been indicated, the rooms, which will each have a title, and both a day and a night aspect, will also have a lunar and a solar alignment. They will be located along a line that at different times of the year and in different years will 'frame' various and specific celestial events. In fact, astronomical phenomenology is one of the visual fundamentals upon which the project is structured. In one room the observer will be able to experience, at winter solstice, the hierophanic appearance of the southernmost sunrise. In ancient traditions, the sunrise at the winter solstice marks the rebirth of the sun, of the year, and of the 'cosmos.' And, as already noted, in ancient Greek the term *kosmos* was used to designate 'the order of the universe.' In another room, on the opposite side of the tunnel, the observer will be able to witness, at the summer solstice, the northernmost sunset. Every eighteen and a half years (a period corresponding to the time it takes for the moon to rise at exactly the same point), the moon and the sun will reflect their disks on two opposite sides of a wall separating two adjacent rooms, thus conceptually merging into one another. These aspects of the project seem to link it to the primary architectures of ancient civilizations, which were designed to function as sacred spaces for the observation of astronomical events and which incorporated a precise celestial symbolism. Thus, the Roden Crater project would seem to open a new chapter in the history of the relationship between primitivism and contemporary art. But, why would a contemporary artist work to reconstruct the most ancient of situations for observing determined astronomical events (such as the sunrise at the winter solstice)? Probably because there is a correlation, the archeo-astronomers would tell us, between initial artistic representation and such events. The shaman who established the conditions whereby at the winter solstice the first light of the astronomical new year illuminated the central symbols of human existence — symbols carved or painted by him on the rocks — assumed the task of collaborating in the maintenance of the order of the universe and in the preservation of the *kosmos*. The shaman thus became both the means and the witness to such events. The contemporary artist, taking on that original role of the artist/shaman, seems to want to interpret anew the very reasons for his/her being and working. The precise verification of a celestial event always implied that its return reaffirmed the order of the world, that the world was safe from extinction. As E.C. Krupp has stated in *Echoes of the Ancient Skies/The Astronomy of Lost Civilizations* (Harper and Row, 1983, p. 141), "the sky's essential meaning is confirmed: it is the door of perception to cosmic order." Today the task of contemporary artists appears to be the creation of a

metaphor analogous to the celestial metaphor of the ancients, that is, to inscribe a sign of the eternal return of the cosmos in all its order. They know that they are ultimately unable to project through their work an organized image of society; so, in order to express their non-integration with the world, their inability to give "*un sens plus pur aux mots de la tribu*," as Mallarmé prescribed in *Le Tombeau d'Edgar Poe*, they take on the desperate role of offering up the illusion that they can, through their art, bring about "the preservation and revelation of cosmic order and the renewal of life."

There is another similarity between the astronomically oriented structure of the Roden Crater project and 'primitive' sites for observing celestial phenomena: both are intended as 'performance spaces.' It has already been noted that the six rooms planned by Turrell within the volcano will follow a solar and lunar alignment. In this way they reconstitute an archetypal logic, close to that described by Krupp in his book: "Astronomical alignments funnel celestial order into prehistoric monuments and turn them into sacred space. . . . Sacred space is a realm [defined as *témenos* and *templum* by the ancient Greeks and Romans] where what we sense to be the basic organization and meaning of the universe is experienced" (p. 217). If we substitute the archeological descriptive term 'temple' with Turrell's designation of his rooms as 'space,' and change the past tense verb to the present tense, then Krupp's text comes close to elucidating the meaning of the Roden Crater skyworks: "When a celestial object appears at the proper time in alignment with a space's design, the event itself is a revelation of cosmic order. The act of observing is an immersion into the sacred," because a building, a space is "made a temple by ritualized observation" (p. 242 and p. 248). Yet Turrell's work is founded on a different and even more complex level of 'contemplation.' It tends not so much toward a religious interpretation or pre-scientific awareness of nature, as rather to the attainment of Experience, that is a discovery through the body of a 'sentiment of space.' In his rooms, and in the reshaped concavity of the crater, the body senses radical experiences and is abnormally conscious of doing so. As Turrell often repeats, "the work deeply affects your feelings and your body becomes extremely alerted to and aware of such feelings." Through the violent modification of normal perceptions of a space or of a phenomenon, which always occurs when one enters a ritual space, he intends to provoke an awareness simultaneously of self and of the 'cosmos,' an awareness of the spatial perfection of the 'cosmos' in both its original sense as the 'celestial vault' and its later meaning as the 'order of the universe.' In his art, Turrell tries to bring the 'magical' richness/intensity of the dream state to the waking state, as experience is quickly transformed into 'revelation.' Upon

exiting from the tunnel and arriving at the center of the crater's fumarole, one lies down on the ground and seeks out the horizon (which coincides with the geometrically rounded rim of the crater) looking backward beyond one's forehead (rather than forward or upward). The spherical explosion of the celestial vault then bursts within one's being, blazing through the body like the displacement of air from a stellar bomb. It is an experience that has the absoluteness, the peremptoriness of the revelation of the *epopteia*, the silent display of the cut ear of corn that initiated the Eleusinian *mystes* into the mystery of death and rebirth. The heightened sense of the mythic roundness of the horizon, of the earth and of the legendary sphericity of the celestial vault — the stellar macrocosm — leads the observer to perceive his or her own perceiving. With this simultaneous/dual perception of the *mundus/kosmos*, and of an exalted state of perception, Roden Crater reaches its climax. The deep subversion of one's usual view of the sky and the realization, within one's microcosmic being, of the experience of 'feeling' (as if 'Feeling' were an extraneous presence abruptly perceived), cause the body to reveal itself as a new body within the ordinary one. (To appropriate an esoteric concept, it is as if an astral body is revealed within the natural body.) Here we arrive at a definition of Roden Crater as an authentic ritual space, a *templum/témenos* which has the ineffability of the sacred as its formal essence. In other words, it is a spatial structure, the contents and meaning of which transcend the formal analysis that is the *raison d'être* of art writing. While it employs natural elements, Roden Crater is unlike any other 'environmental sculpture' or 'sensorial space.' It exists not as a megastructure, inserted in the landscape as a potential/monumental object of contemplation, but rather as a secret 'temple,' invented to the ends of a higher, extra-historical experience of being on the part of an eventual observer. That observer will be closer to the shaman 'skywatcher' than to the visitor of contemporary art museums. Turrell's reshaped volcano creates the basic conditions for the work, but the true work is realized only within the person who experiences it. And so the spectator becomes the performer of the work in the same instant that the work performs upon him. And no trace remains of the artist, of the mental architect, forever hidden within the mountain.