SUBLIMITY IN THE ART OF THE LIGHT AND SPACE MOVEMENT

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Abstract

In the 1960s art moved away from the idea of universal beauty towards a new aesthetic experience, a concept of the sublime which could accommodate the tensions of modernity. A strong example of this new experience can be seen in the works of the Light and Space movement, which emerged in Southern California in the 1960s with the intention of bringing a heightened awareness to our own perceptions of light and space. The movement's artists accomplished this through large-scale installations that provided the viewer with an overwhelming sensory experience that can be characterized as the modern concept of the sublime. This paper explores the transition from an experience of the beautiful toward an experience of the sublime by applying the aesthetic theories of Kant, Adorno, Merleau-Ponty and Lyotard to the art of the Light and Space movement. I examine the question of whether the aesthetic experience is still a factor in art, and what it was about the historic moment of the Light and Space artists that drew us to work that simultaneously invites us to lose ourselves and seeks to re-sensitize us to an experiential way of being.

In a subtle way after the fall of formal beauty the sublime was the only aesthetic experience left to modernism.

- Theodor Adorno, Aesthetic Theory, 197

In the radical history of modern art, we have left the idea of universal beauty of the Kantian enlightenment—but did we leave the aesthetic experience there with it?1 Does an embodied aesthetic experience still exist in modernism? Theodor Adorno described the modern aesthetic experience as “the experience of something which spirit does not have yet either of the world or of itself. It is the experience of the possible, as promised by its impossibility. Art is the promise of happiness, a promise that is constantly broken.”2 Here the aesthetic experience is no longer one of a shared capacity to judge beauty as it was during Kant’s humanist period. Adorno’s idea of the aesthetic experience reflects his views on the oppressive state of modernity; it is about dissonance. The modern aesthetic experience is about the embodiment of the tense space between reality and unreality, between the visible and the invisible.3

The work of Light and Space artist James Turrell embodies this tension in its exhibition of light as a physical presence.4 Through an exploration of Turrell’s work and a consideration of Light and Space artists and thinkers Robert Irwin and Doug Wheeler we

2Theodor Adorno, Aesthetic Theory, ed. Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedemann (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 196.
3When referring to the modern aesthetic experience, I am looking at modernity as the period of time roughly paralleling the period of modern art, from the 1960s through the 1970s.
can view the work of the Light and Space movement as an embodiment of modernist philosophy of perception and the sublime. The Light and Space artists create seemingly infinite hyper-minimalist installations comprised of nothing but space and light, whose presence is both abstract and concretely real. Within these installations viewers lose their footing and are, for an instant, lost in an infinite and overwhelming space. This powerful sensation—like being lost in the abyss of the ocean, or shrouded in heavy fog—is an experience of the sublime.

The installations of the Light and Space movement have the overwhelming and almost frightening qualities Immanuel Kant designated as sublime. Yet it was not until well after Kant's period that the sublime was discussed as a property of art. With this distinction in mind we must view the work of the Light and Space artists as an embodiment not of the historic sublime, but of the modernist sublime, as reinterpreted by Theodor Adorno, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and Jean-Francois Lyotard. These theorists saw the sublime in the the abstract, and in momentary displacements from the physical world. Through the writings of these theorists and a consideration of the influence of technology we see the work of the Light and Space artists as embodying the modern sublime in its presentation of an abstract experience that is simultaneously numbing and re-sensitizing.

The Sublime, Absolute Truth and Aesthetics

In order to explore the experience of the sublime in the Light and Space movement, we must first consider the aesthetic experience and its relation to the idea of the absolute truths sought by modernism. The aesthetic experience is a sensory one. Through art we are able to take in sensory information and conceptualize something that is not quite tangible in the physical world, something slightly removed. Adorno articulates this in his statement, “The question of truth in art comes into view when a non-existent is seen to rise as if it were real.” Here we see art's ability to access something that nature cannot; it accesses abstract and absolute truths in a way that makes them concrete enough to be comprehensible. Through the aesthetic experience, art mediates our abilities to conceptualize an idea and our ability to perceive it through our senses; it bridges our rational and sensing capabilities.

The art of the Light and Space movement focused with great concentration on the space between our reasoning and feeling capabilities. It did this by extracting fragments of experiences of living, distilling them to their purest form, and returning them to the viewer in a new and accessible form.

In my attempt to unpack the aesthetic experience provided by the works of the Light and Space movement it is most productive to view the beautiful and the sublime not as distinct categories, but as two ends of an aesthetic spectrum. Albrecht Wellmer suggests that in Adorno's aesthetic theory the beautiful and the sublime are not opposed to one another, but that for Adorno the sublime signifies “a condition of the possibility of what, under conditions of modern art production, might still be called ‘beauty’: the sublime

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7 Adorno, Aesthetic Theory, 122.
becomes a constituent of artistic beauty.”9
This notion of the sublime as a means to access something of the beautiful helps to explain the residual beauty of the sublimity in the works of the Light and Space movement.

**The Light and Space Movement**

In Southern California in the 1960s, a group of artists strove to create works that would bring a heightened sense of awareness to viewers’ perceptions of light and space. Known as the Light and Space movement, their work reduces art to its purest elements, light and space, removing the hierarchy that is inseparable from narrative imagery and presenting the viewer with a direct bodily experience rather a representation of a bodily experience.10 This idea is eloquently summarized by Light and Space artist James Turrell in his statement that in his work “Light becomes the revelation rather the of revelation.”11

The power of light’s presence is echoed in Doug Wheeler’s description of the intention of his “light encasement” *RM669* (Figure 1), a piece that encases a large square in diffused light causing the encased area to read as a void. Wheeler says of his work, “I want the spectator to stand in the middle of the room and look at the painting and feel that if you walked into it, you’d be in another world.”12 While this glowing, otherworldly quality is a common thread across the works of the Light and Space movement, they are not simply an escape from the physical world. They are intended to re-sensitize viewers to an experiential way of being. Dawna Schuld explains how the works allow the viewer to observe their own knowledge and perception.

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10. Robert Irwin “Lecture for Richard Grey Visual Art Series.” Irwin explains that in representation art the objects in the painting cannot have the same value because they have attached cultural significance.

11. James Turrell (Garage Center for Contemporary Culture, Moscow, 4 August 2011).

being shaped

...not as an object but as an embodied experience...with no specific object to which we might attend, we are left to consider the work in terms of dynamics of perceptual engagement. We take the work with us: our heightened senses, now attuned to the subtleties of the conscious fringe, encounter a more vivid world than the one we left behind.13

Art’s ability to heighten our sensitivity to the subtleties of the physical world is exemplified in Turrell’s Skyspace (Figure 2). In this series Turrell distills the concept of the sky by removing all distractions; the telephone wires that stripe the sky, the buildings that disrupt the horizon, and the horizon itself, all disappear. Turrell puts the viewer in a perfect white cube where a window cut out of the ceiling serves to frame the sky. In this white cube viewers experience the sky in its purest form, they are able to study it, sense the depth of its blue, and see how the white of its clouds compares to the white of the room in which they stand. The viewers can observe how shadows and the intensity of light change throughout the day. The work not only provides a beautiful escape from the complexity of the world; it also pushes the viewer to look at a real world phenomenon -- in this case the sky -- in a deeper and more focused way. When viewers leave this work and looks up at the sky in its natural state they will know it in a different way, they will “encounter a more vivid world.”

Works such as Skyspace embody the tension of modernism by presenting the opportunity for two competing experiences, one of being numbed and one of being re-sensitized; they simultaneously allow temporary relief from the complications of reality, and create an opportunity to engage with reality more directly. Viewers who walk into Skyspace can choose to bask in its simplicity, and briefly escape reality. But the work simultaneously presents an antithetical opportunity to engage with the experience of living. Viewers who walk into Skyspace can also uncover subtle pleasures of reality by engaging with the properties of the sky and studying reality in a space that brings it closer. Skyspace brings the sky down to the viewers’14 so that they may know it more authentically.

Once these two possible ways of experiencing the work are recognized the viewer experiences a tension between escapism and re-sensitization. This experience is possible through the work’s sublime status, which is derived from both the physical scale of the work and the vastness of its abstract concept.

The Cultural Climate of the Light and Space Movement

To understand the drive to create sublime works of art that access powerfully abstract concepts, we must consider the historic moment in which they were created. The Light and Space movement arose during the Cold War’s space race. These works are characteristic of this iconic period in their enthusiastic embrace of the new materials being developed as a part of the aerospace program15 but also in their escapist quality. The works capture “the slick surfaces and commercial landscape” of the postwar paradise that was Los Angeles in the 1960s.16 They also capture a desire to transcend the physical world and a death drive heightened by the anxiety of the post-World War II period.


14Mit Beitragen, James Turrell: The Other Horizon (Vienna: MAK, 1999),96.


16Ibid., 126.
This simultaneous embrace of progress and awareness of its fragility mirrors the climate of the space race. In the wake of the atomic bomb, the space race was a period of both technological excitement and uncertainty. While the technology that was developed was generally perceived as positive, the connection between aerospace technology and militarization left a feeling of tense hesitation. David Nye expresses the sentiment that “technologies had become so complex and inhuman that they could make a mockery of the individual. Whereas a space launch awakened the will to believe, the bomb evoked uncertainty and dread.” The essence of this sentiment is clearly reflected in the Light and Space artists’ use of the technologies of aerospace to make works that invite the viewer to escape a world which these very technologies threatened to make disappear.

The work reflects the goal articulated by Nye in his declaration that with aerospace technology, the “final avatar of the technological sublime is a literal escape from the threatened life world.” Art provides a removed space in which to process this heightened fragility of the life world. The work reflects the overwhelming, terrifying, oppressive and thrilling quality of modernity rather than a shared judgment of universal beauty, the place of Kant’s aesthetic experience. In this way the works of the Light and Space movement exemplify a transition in the aesthetic experience from that of the beautiful towards that of the sublime. They allow the viewer to access their connection to humanity through the shared human experiences of anxiety and emotional response.

The idea that this modern sublime may act as a means of accessing an aesthetic experience that we may still connect to an experience of beauty is key to my examination of the experience of the sublime in James Turrell’s *Dhatu*. This residual notion of beauty may exist in part because of the intentions of the Light and Space artists to create work that values subjective experience and individual perception.

**The Modern Sublime in Turrell’s *Dhatu* 2010**

In its attempt to present an absolute truth, the work of Light and Space artist James Turrell embodies the modern sublime. Turrell began creating large light installations in the 1960s which overwhelmed the viewer in scale and allowed the viewer to consider light in isolation, feeling it as concrete and physically present. Installations such as the *Wedgework* series allowed viewers to have a tactile experience with something that might ordinarily be incomprehensibly abstract. Turrell says of his work, “In working with light, what is really important to me is to create an experience of wordless thought, to make the quality and sensation of light itself something really quite tactile. It has a quality seemingly intangible, yet it is physically felt. Often people reach and try to touch it.”

This goal, born out of his work in the 1960s and 70s, comes to fruition in *Dhatu* (Figure 4). In this piece, light’s physical presence fills the room causing the viewer to lose all sense of space. Its illusion of placelessness and disorientation is so powerful that several visitors have actually fallen down reaching for walls that were not where they believed them to be. This is an experience not only of momentary blindness and disoriented placelessness, but also of the physical presence of the abstract. Thus, it embodies the modern sublime.

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18Ibid., 254.
Figure 3a: James Turrell, *Dhatu*, 2010

Figure 3b: James Turrell, *Dhatu*, 2010

© James Turrell. Image Credit: Gagosian Gallery
When viewers step into Dhatu, they are overwhelmed by an abyss. This effect is created within a white room with one wall removed; viewers looking at the work from outside the room perceive it as a flat light installation. Upon stepping into the room, viewers lose their sense of space, walking towards a lit void of colored light at the far end of the room. All elements that allow viewers to perceive the scale of the space have been removed; for example, the hard edges where walls meet floor have been smoothed to invisible curves. Viewers become small in an infinite space. Inside Dhatu there is nothing but light. In this environment, light gains a more palpable presence; it becomes the sensory material that allows for a bodily experience of art or an aesthetic experience.

The experience of being within Dhatu’s void is both numbing and re-sensitizing. Viewers are completely overwhelmed by the space; they are small and alone in an infinite and unknowable universe. They have no way of locating and positioning themselves in reality, and so are confronted with the possibility of giving up, and transcending into the infinite unknown. Viewers may experience a sort of sterile nothingness, or a drive towards surrendering the fight against the struggles of reality: an experience of escape. At the same time, the work is re-sensitizing; it reduces the complexity of the modern world to its primordial elements, light and space. The work pushes viewers to have a bodily encounter with the world, to have a moment of tactile engagement with the physicality of light which re-sensitizes viewers to the most basic sensations of being human and of experiencing the world. This is an experience being exceptionally present in reality. Dhatu embodies the tension of modernity by confronting viewers with the anxiety of the modern world, which pushes them to want to leave it altogether and accessing their desire to have a sensory experience of living. Dhatu thus provides viewers with an authentic aesthetic experience in its efforts to access an absolute.

This aesthetic experience, however, is more of the sublime than the beautiful. The experience of the sublime is one of being overwhelmed by something infinite and threatening, losing your footing, fearing that you might fall into the abstract and incomprehensible. Kant describes the sublime as truthful, formless and unbounded. He argues that the sublime embodies quality rather than represents it, providing a powerful experience. The experience of the sublime articulated by Kant is one of negative pleasure that both attracts and repels; the intensity of this experience momentarily overwhelms you to the point of inhibiting bodily response, it paralyzes you for a fraction of an instant, leaving you feeling ultimately in admiration of its power.

Kant explains this negative pleasure as the experience of being in the face of, or trying to conceptualize and represent, something inexplicable and overwhelming. Viewers cannot articulate or render exactly the feeling of standing in the presence of its greatness; this causes them to feel pain. This pain

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24Ibid., 221.
resides in the space between a subject that can be thought about and understood, and a subject that can be explained and represented. Within this pain is what Kant describes as a sort of doubled negative pleasure: the negative pleasure of realizing the limited power of the imagination to attempt to figure out that which it cannot, and the negative pleasure of the inevitable inadequacy of the image's ability to represent the great power of ideas.26 This sort of tension between the pain of failure and the pleasure of the difficulty of the challenge causes Kant to connect the sublime with pathos while he connects the beautiful with calm.27

The qualities of the experience of the sublime explained by Kant are quite similar to the qualities of Dhatu. In Dhatu's boundless, formless space, viewers are overwhelmed to the point of being inhibited for a fraction of a second; they experience a sort of negative pleasure from losing their footing in an infinite space, from the disorientation of not knowing. In response to this disorientation they feel admiration for the power of light and space. They are physically forced to stop and find their balance. This type of power is rarely achieved by art. Galen Johnson suggests that although Kant's sublime was not to be applied to art, had Kant seen what was coming for art he might have extended his concepts of the sublime to apply to art,28 as Adorno's Aesthetic Theory did in 1969.

Adorno wrote, “In a subtle way after the fall of formal beauty the sublime was the only aesthetic experience left to modernism,” and that “art practice (has been) penetrated by that which Kant had reserved for nature as sublime.”29 For Adorno, this sublime is accessed through modern art’s desire for absolutes and through its presentation of nothingness. Dhatu seeks access to absolutes through its reduction of the world to nothing but empty space. The process strikingly resembles the methods used by color field painters and abstract expressionists in their modernist quest for absolutes.30 Lyotard summarizes this goal and its connection to both Adorno and Dhatu in his statement that Barnett Newman “found an emptiness in the work that was the emptiness not of nothing, but of an original and sublime, there is something.”31

Dhatu presents viewers with nothing in order to allow them conscious and bodily experience of something, in this case, an experience of light. This concept echoes Adorno’s statement that “the question of truth in art comes into view when a non-existent is seen as if it were real.”32 In Dhatu, light and space, which are normally invisible phenomena, too abstract to be part of our conscious reality, are quite literally seen as real. Albrecht Wellmer analyzes Adorno’s reference to the absolute something as an unknowable and inaccessible presence: “Through its reference to the absolute, which is veiled in black, modern art

26Ibid., 98
27Ibid., 98. In this simple dichotomy we see the possibility of experiencing Dhatu as a calm, meditative and beautiful space, of owning your own experience of the space, and of having a self-driven discovery of light and space; we see the possibility of having an experience of the beautiful and the carry-over of beautiful qualities into an experience of Dhatu which would be categorized as sublime.

29Adorno, Aesthetic Theory, 197.
Lyotard, who like Adorno felt that Modern art got its power from the sublime, stated, “I think in particular that it is in the aesthetic of the sublime that modern art finds its impetus and the logic of avant-gardes finds its axioms.”
31Ibid., 227.
32Adorno, Aesthetic Theory, 122.
for Adorno becomes an art of the sublime.”

Dhatu attempts to access this veiled absolute by pushing viewers to try to access concepts of the infinite. In this attempt, tension arises between a desire to discover the unknowable concepts and a desire to transcend reality and accept their unknowable status. This experience is described by Wellmer’s reading of Adorno, in which he proposes that Adorno gives two solutions to the problem of the sublime in modern art resulting from the destruction of the polarity between the empirical and noumenal worlds. The solution that relates to Dhatu is that “the place of the sublime would be the tension between reality of the modern world and utopia veiled in black, between complete negativity and a state of reconciliation.”

In Dhatu’s attempt to reconcile viewers’ feelings of anxiety and desire to transcend the physical world, with the viewers’ desire to experience the reality of the physical world, the work accesses this place of the sublime. Dhatu gives us an empty and slightly removed space in which to work on reconciliation between life and death, between something and nothing, between the physical and the spiritual world. The work creates a void in which the lines that define and separate these concepts begin to soften and blur.

In this space that is lonely, isolating, and sterile, and at the same time undeniably real, present and alive, we begin to be able to conceptualize these abstractions, to see the possibility of reconciling these irreconcilable divisions. Wellmer states, “For Adorno withstanding the negativity of the world is only possible in the name of an absolute, it is not nothing, it is the space between being and not being, that the sublime finds its place, in the silver light provided by this in-between.” This is the space that viewers can experience within Dhatu. They are in a transitory space somewhere between something and nothing. The power of this experience comes from the infinite and formless qualities of the work itself, from the indescribable result of embracing radical reduction, from presenting the absence of something. Through Adorno’s theories of the sublime we see that Kant’s sublime can be reinterpreted in light of trends in modern art to apply to art, despite Kant’s claims rejecting art’s status as sublime. Here Kant’s theory of the sublime seems very much in keeping with the art of the Light and Space movement.

Through an examination of the formal qualities of Dhatu we are able to see the physical elements that create its sublimity. These physical elements can be examined through Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s contributions to phenomenology and David Nye’s writings on the technological sublime. Merleau-Ponty and Nye help us to see that by taking Kant’s ideas as a framework and reconsidering them in light of modernist theories, we find evidence of the sublime in Dhatu, and on a broader scale we see evidence of a shift towards the sublime aesthetic experience in modern art.

The artists of the Light and Space movement were heavily influenced by phenomenology in their quest to create work that evoked embodied aesthetic experience. The influence of Merleau-Ponty’s writings in the work’s quest for embodied experience is made clear in his feeling that there was too little

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34 Ibid., 117.
35 Ibid., 117-118.
36 Ibid., 126.
body in Kant’s aesthetics. This renewal of the bodily experience is at the core of the Light and Space movement. Merleau-Ponty articulates his ideas on perception in his essay *Eye and Mind,* in which he argues that perception is not just thought, it is bodily; he describes the body as both visible and mobile, as “being caught in the fabric of the world.” Merleau-Ponty believed that art “gives visible existence to what profane vision believes to be invisible” and allows us to “sense the voluminocity of the world.”

We see this experience enacted in *Dhatu,* which follows the trend of radical reduction in modern art to make visible what is normally invisible, the voluminocity of light and space. This is achieved through its presentation of a void in which we perceive ourselves perceiving.

Kant’s theory of negative presentation provides insight into why we might reduce something as complex and beautiful as the art achieved by the great master painters to essentially nothing, as minimalism did. He illustrates this theory with the example of the ban on images in Mosaic Law: when attempts to represent the spirit are banned, its image becomes more powerful and promotes an infinite concept. In a negative presentation or non-presentation the lack of representation of ideas leaves viewers with a void, which they then fill with something more powerful than that which an artist could present through literal or narrative representation. In this way the work transcends the limitations of the visual world and accesses the greater abilities of conceptualization of the mind and soul.

This experience of the sublime is made possible through the radical reductionism of the Light and Space movement. In *Dhatu,* Turrell presents a void in which viewers can begin to conceptualize their ideas about light and space and find awareness of their own perceptions. Light, which ordinarily remains in the fringe of consciousness as a vague concept, has a physical presence; and by perceiving light itself in empty space rather than a representation of light, viewers are able to conceptualize more concretely what before may have been loose and abstract. In *Dhatu* it is in nothingness that the experience of something sublime can be found.

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40 Ibid., 127.
41 Robert Irwin, “Lecture for Richard Grey Visual Art Series.” Irwin discusses the idea of reduction as central to the radical history of modern art. Irwin describes reduction as a method for breaking away from the hierarchy of representational work. He describes the process of this reduction using the transition from painting the blood of the king of kings on the cross to painting simply red. He says first we painted the king of king’s blood on the cross, a subject of great meaning that was connected to the beautiful idea of art being transcendence and a way of living beyond ourselves. This idea of transcendence began to vanish, and we painted the king in his red robe, then a commoner in a red coat sitting in the grass with a nude women, then a red cloth and red apples and finally just red.

Irwin questions the significance of this artistic revolution, asking, “Why in the world would we take something so meaningful and so beautifully put together and take it apart?” He concludes that “it’s not an accident, it’s not incidental, too many generations, too many people have acted in the same force for it to be incidental, so you have to take it seriously.” At the core of these questions is phenomenology and the notion that through reduction we can access the essence of something and interact with it directly.

42 Lyotard, *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time,* 98. Lyotard points out that Kant’s theory of negative presentation predicts minimalism and avant-gardism with impressive foresight.
43 Ibid.
The sublime experience of a reduction to pure light created by *Dhatu* is influenced by another factor, which Kant could not have accounted for: technology. The light that emanates from the back wall of *Dhatu* is not natural sunlight; it is artificial, a product of technology. Technology allows the light of *Dhatu* to be distilled, purified and intensified, yet because of the technological origins of its sublimity its light is different from that of the natural world, the place of Kant's sublimity. David Nye explains it as a shift from a response to being dominated by the natural world to a response to our own domination of the natural world. 44

With the technological sublime we are no longer overwhelmed by an experience of nature, but by a product of human creation, by our own domination over the natural world. Here we can create an experience more intense than one provided by the natural world. We can create light that overwhelms us more than that of sun, and build on a scale that overwhelms us more than scale of the natural world.

Nye states that “Kant’s sublime made the individual humble in the face of nature, the technological sublime exalted the conquest of nature. The electrical sublime represented a third kind of experience, as it dissolved the distinction between natural and artificial sites. In blurring or even erasing this line, it created a synthetic environment infused with mystery.” 45 It is here that the work of the Light and Space artists fits into the realm of the technological sublime. They create phenomena through new technological materials, but these works incorporate both natural and artificial light, melding the technological and the natural worlds. They use technological light to distill the experience of light, representing an intensified natural experience. Here the individual is neither humble in the face of nature nor celebrating humanity’s conquest of nature. Instead the art of the Light and Space movement makes use of the technological sublime to bracket and intensify a natural experience that can become lost in the complexity of modernity. To accomplish this bracketing effect, *Dhatu* uses artificial light to make the materials of the industrial world, the walls and ceiling of the room disappear, leaving behind the powerful tension of the void. 46

In *Dhatu* all of these factors culminate in an experience of tension between feeling and thinking art and between nature and technology. The work allows us to access the tension between transcendence and physical experience, between life and death. In its ability to access the power of these fundamental tensions, *Dhatu* is an embodiment of the modern sublime. The theories of modern art build on Kant’s framework to create the concept of a new aesthetic experience, a modernist sublime which does not exclude the beautiful as it did in its Kantian articulation, and it is not quite so terrifying because its power is mediated by technology, giving man a small amount of control in his experience of the sublime.

The experience of the sublime provided by *Dhatu* becomes a shared experience of being lost or disoriented under the influence of a powerful and unknowable modernity. Within its abyss of modernity everyone is subjected to the same exterior forces and experiences them as a part of humanity, so that the modernist sublime shares qualities with Kant’s experience of beauty. Wellmer describes the agreement that exists between Kant and Adorno on this idea of shared experience:

45 Ibid., 152.

Adorno and Kant see the sublime as tension between the experience of an abyss of meaninglessness through which subject becomes aware of its own fragility and the subject’s resistance to the superior force of negativity through which the subject is able to sublate the experience of its own negligibility within the world of communicatively shared meaning.47

This connection to the world of shared meaning, made accessible through art, allows us to access Kant’s notion of aesthetic experience. Here, however, the tension of an oppressive modernity is the shared human experience rather than Kant’s shared judgment of universal beauty. Wellmer articulates the tension between feeling that individual experience is meaningless, losing the fragile individual in the abyss, and realizing the importance of the individual subject. This second experience is one of realizing individual experience as part of a larger and valuable shared experience of living in the world.

In many ways the tension articulated in Wellmer’s statement encapsulates the tension experienced in Dhatu. It offers the possibility of losing yourself in the abyss, of rejecting the opportunity to have a subjective experience of perception, of succumbing to your own fragility and of experiencing a sedated and sterilized negation of life in the sublime. It also offers the possibility of valuing your own subjective experience of perception as part of a larger shared experience of living. It offers, in James Turrell’s words, the experience of “perceiving yourself perceiving”48 and of realizing that this is a shared, valuable, and distinctly human capability. This is an allowance of the experience of life, presented by the power of the experience of the sublime. The great significance of this allowance of the experience of life lies in the realization that this experience of the sublime is universally accessible, through our innate sensing capacity.

In Lyotard’s essay “The Sublime and the Avant Garde,” we find evidence of the unifying and accessible power of the sublime. He recounts Boileau’s reflection on Longinus, “The sublime cannot be taught, the sublime requires only that the reader or listener have conceptual range, taste and the ability to ‘sense what everyone senses first.’”49 Boileau adds to this, “The sublime is not strictly speaking something which is proven or demonstrated, but a marvel, which seizes one, strikes one, and makes one feel.”50 In this way the aesthetic experience provided by the sublime gives us a more equal access to the shared experience of humanity than the experience of the beautiful historically has. It is shared through our collective capacity to feel, to take in sensory information and conceptualize it, to find an experiential way of being. This shared experience is provided through our shared subjection to the higher power of the piece, or its sublime status.

Dhatu provides a shared experience of the sublime in that each of its viewers has access to the same sensory experience of feeling the power of being overwhelmed by the scale of the space, and of having a tactile experience with light. This is the goal of the Light and Space artists: to provide a bodily aesthetic experience for viewers to rediscover their capacity to feel and to discover that this capacity is both shared and distinctly human.

48Craig E. Adcock, James Turrell: The Art of Light and Space (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 68
49 Lyotard, The Inhuman: Reflections on Time, 96.
50 Ibid., 97.
Robert Irwin said of our capacity as feeling beings, “The role of the artist is to continually explore and introduce ourselves and others to the pure potential of the human being to perceive the world, we are unbelievably sensitive, we are spectacular in terms of our potential as just feeling beings.” The work of the Light and Space artist is the product of this sort of thinking, of re-sensitizing viewers to their capacity as feeling beings whether the result of that experience is pain or joy. The sublime experience created by Dhatu provides a neutral space in which to grapple with the tensions of a complex modern world.

The value placed on embodied experience in Dhatu is seen throughout the works of the Light and Space artists and reflects their work with phenomenology. They place a high value on direct perception and the subjective nature of experience. In creating works that offer both the possibility of transcendence and of re-sensitization through vast technological lightscapes, they access tension that gives them both power and authenticity. In their use of technology to create a void in which the material world disappears, they access the uneasiness that comes with the creation of powerful artificial light as well as Kant’s negative presentation. These things come together to create an experience that is an embodiment of the modern sublime. Lyotard summarizes these ideas in his statement, “The modern sublime is still about the thing and our feeling in the presence of the thing.” The thing presented by the works of the Light and Space movement is difficult to pinpoint, it is true, because it is a presentation of reality itself. This sublime thing is, as Adorno said, “veiled in black” and not fully accessible. We can only try to conceptualize it and attempt to access its truth, and in this way it retains its power.

In the work of the Light and Space movement we are removed from the complication of reality just enough to be able to grapple with the abstract and with the tension and anxiety of the climate of the 1960s and 70s. The Light and Space artists remove the intensity of this tension, anxiety and complexity; they sterilize the experience of living, just enough so that it is bearable, and in this way we are able to enjoy being in the world and feeling the presence of light and space. The works of the Light and Space artists present an environment that allows us to feel the tension of modernity deeply because they remove the threat of vulnerability that prevents us from feeling.

Despite this separation, the work of the Light and Space movement skirts the category of escapism by retaining the connection to reality that is called for by Adorno. The enjoyment of light and space does not come without the ever-present knowledge of the possibility of giving up, of transcending the fragility of life, it does not come without acknowledgement of the harshness of reality. By tackling these issues the work is able to fulfill the human desire to grapple with a tension that was intensified by this period of heightened awareness of the fragility of the life world that created it. The work of the Light and Space movement’s ability to de-contextualize the experience of its period and to isolate just one feature of the experience of living, achieves something that man and nature cannot. Here the aesthetic experience survives as both a feeling and thinking experience.

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52 Johnson, The Retrieval of the Beautiful: Thinking Through Merleau-Ponty’s Aesthetics, 228.
Epilogue

The contemporary postmodern sublime is about an event, the moment something happens. -Lyotard

The work of the Light and Space movement came out at a point of transition away from modernism towards the postmodern period. Light and Space work retains the core modernist belief that through art we are able to access some sort of greater truth. Light and Space artists held onto these ideas, exploring the uncontaminated truth of direct bodily experience, so that despite their use of postmodern materials their work remains essentially modernist. So we now must ask what happens to the aesthetic experience once we leave behind these modernist ideas completely, entering our own fully postmodern period in which art no longer attempts to offer some sort of transcendence, or to access a greater truth. In our period, art deals with the fractured and fragmented world, it deals with individual realities and concepts not universal truths and unknowable presences. According to Habermas, in the postmodern period aesthetics are no longer expressed as a judgment of taste but as a referential language game. Continuing in this trajectory of thought, Lyotard states that “in the absence of aesthetic criteria” of the anything-goes “period of slackening” that is postmodernism, “it remains possible and useful to assess the value of works of art according to the profits they yield.”

This grim assessment of postmodernism brings up some of the central points of criticism in this shift towards an artistic period that seeks to expose the artificiality and the plurality of experience, inviting personal interpretation, rather than art that seeks to expose fundamental truths and assert absolutes. We can see this transition in the way that the artistic concepts of the Light and Space which are revisited in the work of Olafur Eliasson yield a different response in a postmodern context. In a careful examination of the period in which Eliasson’s work arose we can begin to pinpoint what exactly it is that makes it feel so different from the work of the light and space artists.

At first sight, Eliasson’s 360-Degree room for all colours (Figure 4) seems quite similar to James Turrell’s Dhatu (Figures 3a and 3b). In each work viewers stand before a field of colored light that overwhelms their fields of vision. In each work viewers lose their perceptions of where they end and where the work begins, because they are enveloped in light. In Turrell’s work this leads to an aesthetic experience, a powerful experience of the modernist sublime. Turrell’s work speaks to its period of anxiety and in response it provides an experience that is both numbing and re-sensitizing. We cannot argue the same of Eliasson’s work, as there is something fundamentally different about it that seems to

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53Johnson, The Retrieval of the Beautiful: Thinking Through Merleau-Ponty’s Aesthetics, 228.
54Lyotard, “Answering the Question: What is Postmodernism?,” 239.
55Ibid., 243.
embrace the simulation of spectacle over the authenticity of experience. This spectacle is inarguably postmodern. Eliasson’s work does not seek to recreate an authentic and bodily experience of light and space but rather to reference natural experiences of being completely enveloped in your surroundings through technological simulation. What makes these works different from the works of the Light and Space movement is that they are supposed to be simulations, referential rather than authentic. They take the style and concepts tied to authenticity in the Light and Space movement and expose their artificiality, by showing the machinery that creates them. Eliasson’s work celebrates its own artificiality. His work is about falling into the spectacle, enjoying its mindless pleasure and then uncovering the machinery that created it, and taking pleasure in that discovery as well. Eliasson says of his work,

I think the reason you want to show the machine is to remind people that they’re looking. At certain times you can sit in a cinema and become so engaged with the film that you kind of join the level of representation, but then the next moment you flip back out. And I think the ability to go in and out of the work showing the machinery—is important today. My work is very much about positioning the subject.56

In his intention to show the artificiality of the machine, Eliasson is exposing the experience he presents as a simulation but also celebrating the technology that created that simulation.

The work was built in 2002 during a period of celebration of technological advances and globalization. It is in the examination of the differences between the historic periods out of which each of these bodies of work emerged that we can begin to pinpoint the difference between them. Here we can begin to see what makes Eliasson’s work less effective, less human, and less emotionally powerful. We begin to understand why it seems to offer, not an invitation to re-sensitizing oneself to an experiential way of being, but an invitation to be entertained by mechanical spectacle. This difference arises from the fact that Eliasson’s work does not represent a period of fear and uneasiness, but rather it celebrates technology and our ability to manufacture a spectacle.

The work is a product of Joseph Pine and James Gilmore’s “experience economy” as discussed by Noah Horowitz in the Art of the Deal.57 The work becomes a tourist destination and entertainment experience and it reflects an art market that is adjusting its supply to a new economy that demands experience. This causes the work to provide an experience of being numbed and entertained rather than of being re-sensitized. Sublimity is no longer in art, but in speculation on art.”58 In many ways this leads us back to where we started. Now the question is no longer what became of the aesthetic experience in modern art, but what becomes of the aesthetic experience in postmodern art?

Acknowlegements
I would like to thank Professor Stimson for all of the time he took to work with me on this project. I would also like to thank Professor Min, Professor Ruda, Professor Strazdes, and Sharon Knox for working with me to rework, edit, and present this paper.


58Lyotard, The Inhuman, 106