Seeing Is Forgetting the Name of the Thing One Sees: A Life of Contemporary Artist Robert Irwin Study Guide

Seeing Is Forgetting the Name of the Thing One Sees: A Life of Contemporary Artist Robert Irwin by Lawrence Weschler

BOOKRAGS

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Plot Summary

"Seeing is Forgetting, The Name of the Thing One Sees - A Life of Contemporary Artist Robert Irwin" by Lawrence Weschler, is the life story of controversial artist Robert Irwin. Irwin is the first California artist to rise to a stellar position within the art world. The book chronicles Irwin from his modest beginnings in suburban Los Angeles through his journey of self-discovery in finding his place in the art world. He ultimately pursues the somewhat unrealistic goal of stripping objects of art down to a presence or indeed a perception.

As the son of working class parents, Irwin holds down jobs from beginning at a very young age, gaining a discipline and ethic that serves him well later in his art career. He is not a particularly good student in high school—his major passions are music and dancing, hot cars and girls. While his mother, like all mothers, fawned over his childhood artwork, there was no obvious sign that Robert was heading towards a career in art. Although his family did not frequent museums and he did not take private art lessons, at a very young age Irwin somehow knew that his future would be in the world of art.

After a stint in the military, Robert makes his future ambitions known and enrolls in art school. Early on, his instructors could see a raw and unique talent in his work. After finishing art school, he feels he learned much about technique and nothing about art. Irwin makes many long visits to Europe during the ten years following art school. He lives a solo life while there, sleeping in the day and walking the streets of Paris alone at night. He visits museums and dismisses much of the art he sees, including that of the masters. He lives on a Spanish island for eight months without once talking to another soul. Unwittingly, he is stripping his mind of preconceived notions and established ideals. Robert, on his own in Europe, learns what art is and what it is not—at least in his perception.

Back in California, Irwin begins a long association with the Ferus Gallery, a southern California entity that attracts many of his fellow contemporaries. Irwin contributes his success at Ferus to the relaxed atmosphere of the environment which allows him to develop without the constraints and pressure that exist in the undisputed US art capital in New York. It is at Ferus that Irwin makes a Zen-like connection to his art and challenges himself to bring that experience to viewers of his work.

Irwin focuses on painting lines, dots and discs for most of his early years as an artist. His goal in painting these objects is to have them virtually disappear into the canvas. His hope is that the object he paints is not a barrier to the viewer experiencing the "presence" of the work. Always on a quest of self-discovery, Irwin moves on to creating columns and works using light filtered through scrim. Some of his works are rooms with no obvious object of art—the room is the art. As Irwin gains more knowledge of himself and his own perceptions of art, he expands into teaching art students and into working with a physicist on experiments that present the concept that art can provide answers that logic is unable to supply.

Irwin's self discovery compels him to abandon his practices and techniques and to sell his studio and all his belongings in order to open himself up to what may be next. He even entertains the possibility that his career in art is over. In many visits to the desert he finds magic and energy that he then brings to his work. Through word of mouth, Irwin makes himself "available" at no cost to anyone who needs him. This offer eventually brings in many requests for lectures before art students and eventually large-scale projects and installations. He becomes enamored with the philosophy of phenomenology which addresses the dual challenge of becoming "reasonable" and "responsible." Irwin's philosophy includes the concept that perception is the foundation of everything else but that it also the most difficult to connect with.

In his later years, Irwin takes on the largest, most complex projects of his life. They are works that are installed mainly outdoors and that connect with nature. He has long abandoned having concern over whether his work is considered art or not. Art critics, through the years, have found difficulty in adequately labeling Irwin. At varying times he was considered an abstract impressionist and a minimalist and finally a pioneer in reductive progression—removing any "distraction" from the experience of perception. Robert Irwin maintained a unique approach to art, driven by an equally unique curiosity, throughout his entire career.

Chapter 1

Chapter 1 Summary and Analysis

Robert Irwin grew up in southwest Los Angeles, attending high school in the mid-forties. He attributes his easy sense of well-being at least in part to that experience. Most of his colleagues at the Ferus Gallery—L.A.'s funky, avant-garde community of artists—grew up in similar backgrounds. It was an artistically rich place in which to grow up. Irwin can spot a southern Californian in any place in the world, from Michigan to Europe; they just have an easy, free-wheeling way of dealing with life. They can have instantaneous and intimate conversations with total strangers. Though they may not have much in the way of material wealth, they look at the world as their oyster just waiting to give them all the pearls they want. There is nothing Irwin likes more than cruising around L.A. at any time of the day or night and stopping to enjoy a Coke.

Recently, Irwin began living with Joan Tewkesbury, who is a successful screenwriter, having written Robert Altman's Nashville and Thieves Like Us. It was in her honor that Irwin wrote the unproduced screenplay The Green and the White (his high school's colors) whose characters symbolized his high school days in L.A. He contrasts his growing years with those of Jews growing up in Brooklyn, the latter usually spawning intellects, albeit those with a downcast, dark side. Irwin's development in breezy southern California came with no such gloomy cynicism.

Irwin's family is working middle class, and he therefore works his entire time in high school. As a young teen who loves music, Irwin teaches himself to dance well enough to enter and win many dancing contests. Irwin is so successful with these competitions that he is averaging $100 per week in prize money. His love of the music from that era—Benny Goodwin, Frank Sinatra, Count Basie—remains a constant throughout his life. Irwin relates how he got involved with a young married waitress in the area. The irate, rather unstable, husband almost shoots him one night over the dalliance with his wife.

Irwin's views on feminism and race relations were always ahead of his times. He is very liberal in his thinking, believing that a black person is no less a person than he and that young women who were not virgins were not to be looked down upon. Repercussions from World War II have very little effect upon Irwin and his buddies—the siphoning of neighbor's gas during rationing seems to stand out as having the most war-time relevancy to his young life. To Irwin and his young male friends, the most important thing in life is their cars, as they provided a large measure of their identity. It is optimum to get a sought-after style of car in cherry condition—but few can afford it. Their cars provide importance and heft to their identities as well as a place to make out with their girlfriends. This sentiment is reflected in Irwin's screenplay. Although many art critics disagree, Irwin connects his love of cars and perfecting them physically to his later emergence as an artist—especially in the realm of folk art.

Although Irwin is not a good student, he is welcome in many social cliques. He loves school only for its social opportunities, but early on an art teacher does take note of his natural talent. Due to his school's proximity to the Hollywood Park Race Track, Irwin becomes interested in gambling, something that, like his music, stays with him during his entire life. Irwin and his friends seem to live a charmed life—being rather active sexually but never impregnating any of their girlfriends.

Chapter 2

Chapter 2 Summary and Analysis

Irwin's mother confirms that her son does not like to think of things unpleasant; rather, he is tenacious about living and accomplishing in the present. Overton Irwin, Robert's father, ran a successful construction business until he lost everything in the Depression. There was only one commonality between father and son and that was love of sports. Goldie, Robert's mother, was the thinker and worrier of the family. Irwin feels he got his drive to accomplish from his mother. Irwin and his brother attend the Mormon church with their mother. However, at age ten, Irwin announces that he will no longer go to church. Irwin's mother is upset and tries to convince him that bad things will come his way if he turns his back on the church. Irwin and his mother finally find peace in his decision, although she is always rooting for him to lose big in his gambling ventures, which would thereby provide vindication for her stance against his decision to quit the church.

The genesis of Irwin's artistry is vague. His mother, like most other mothers, loved his childhood drawings, but the family did not focus on art nor visit museums. That Irwin's childhood recollections reside mainly as perfect images versus words or conversations is a clue that his strong connection to the visual was present very early in life. In her latter years, after Irwin becomes a successful artist, she has a difficult time explaining to her friends that her son is an artist, but not a commercial artist; rather, one whose work would only be displayed in museums. Although she defends her son's work and is proud of it, she admits she doesn't always understand it. He is beyond her. And where this artistry stems from is a mystery to her. Goldie confirms that her son's tie with his father was one-dimensional, i.e. sports. Although there was an innate pride in his son's modern art, Overton understood it less than his wife.

As a young child, Irwin exhibited an unusually strong independent streak. He was a cautious child who could perceive danger and cope with it. Both parents found Robert a joy to raise and a kid who never caused a moment's consternation. But there remains a mystery. While Robert claims no discomfiture in his youth and his mother apparently provided Robert with an ethical foundation and his father indoctrinated him with an easy-going approach to life, what engendered the solitary life that Irwin came to experience is an unknown.

Chapter 3

Chapter 3 Summary and Analysis

After graduating from high school, Robert's buddies convince him to join them in signing up for the military—the GI benefits are alluring. Robert winds up with the paratroopers. In short order, he is transferred to the regular Army due to an injury and winds up in Europe. He cut short his time in Europe by exchanging one year of active duty for three years in the army reserve. By age nineteen, he returns to Los Angeles. Upon his return, he immediately enrolls in the Otis Art Institute—claiming he knew he would be an artist even before high school.

As an art student, Robert is both blessed and cursed. His natural talent precludes him from garnering much attention from his professors. While he is able to soar on his own talent, he is never faced with challenge. His talent carries him through three art schools and garners praise from art critics and victories in competitions. In his early days, subjects include old men and derelicts and atypical scenery: for example, an abandoned shipyard. Irwin is called back to active duty in the Army during the Korean War. He escapes foreign service by securing an assignment stateside in California. During this tour, he gets involved in organizing a sports program. He submits a drawing of a soldier and wins first place in a military competition.

Upon his return to LA, Irwin enrolls in the Jepson Art institute, which is staffed by art luminaries of the day, including Rico Lebrun, Howard Warshaw and William Brice. Irwin is singularly unimpressed with Lebrun's lectures, which focuses on the politics of the day—Marxism, McCarthyism. Irwin isn't interested in these diversions—he wants only to make art. His dissatisfaction with Jepson then leads him to the Chouinard Art Institute, where he focuses on dreamy watercolors. Done with art institutes, Irwin feels he has learned much about technique but very little about art.

After leaving art school, Irwin spends many months and years in Europe over the course of the next ten years. He finally gets his art education and learns, with an increasingly discernible eye, what art is appealing to him. He abandons old conventions and finds no interest in many of the masters including DaVinci and Francesca. What is new and somewhat uncomfortable for the formerly gregarious Irwin is the solitary life. Speaking no foreign languages, Irwin finds himself alone and apart. He often walks the streets of Paris at night when no one else is around. At one point, Irwin rents a cabin on the Spanish island of Ibiza, so remote at the time that he does not speak to another person for eight months. This period proves to be an important and introspective time in Irwin's life.

After seeing the movie Singin' in the Rain, he decides to return to LA. Soon after, he marries Nancy Oburg, a woman seven years his junior. Irwin sells some art pieces to decorators but becomes bored with this genre of art and begins moving steadily toward the abstract.

Chapter 4

Chapter 4 Summary and Analysis

Irwin grows discontented with his show at the Felix Landau Gallery in Los Angeles. It is then that he realizes how unhappy he is with his work. His dissatisfaction compels him to begin an association with the Ferus Gallery, which fostered the coming of age of the modernist artist in LA in the sixties. The Ferus Gallery was established by two young artists and art enthusiasts, Walter Hopps and Edward Kienholz. Even though Irwin's art was still on display at Landau, Irwin begins spending all his time with the artists at Landau, where he is greatly influenced by several of them.

Although the level of artistry is superb in Irwin's eyes, Ferus is not making many sales—which they need in order to stay in business. Irving Blum, an entrepreneur from New York, comes to the rescue and greatly improves the fiscal operation of the gallery. One of the first steps he takes is to pare down the number of artists at Ferus. Although Irwin was not one of the original artists, he is chosen to be in the new, smaller group. Blum not only admires Irwin's art but also his determination and ambition to succeed. It is during his association with Ferus that Irwin evolves from a figurative painter to an abstract impressionist. Blum regrets that some of the Ferus artists fail to move to New York where they could be successful. To Blum, Irwin is exceptional and thus was able to flourish in LA and indeed anywhere.

Irwin attributes his success at Ferus, at least in part, to the relaxed atmosphere of the West Coast. In New York, the undisputed capital of art in America, the art world was more rigid and demanding. In LA, he was allowed to not over-think his work and thereby was able to be at his most creative. Due to New York's prestige in the world of art, it was inevitable, however, that the Ferus artists compared themselves to the artisans of the galleries of New York.

When confronted with the serene Irwin of his later years, Blum is skeptical. Where did the fierce and intense artist go? He mistrusts the tranquility he saw emerging in Irwin.

Chapter 5

Chapter 5 Summary and Analysis

This period chronicles Irwin's transformation from abstract impressionist to minimalist artisan, ultimately the definitive genre of his artistry. He is compelled to reach new levels in his work at Ferus, an environment that presents Irwin with his first experience with contemporaries whose work is superior to his own. He feels the need to "catch up." He begins by painting expressionist abstracts on very large—8' x 10', for example—canvases. They are emotive paintings very rich in color and expression. Irwin focuses self-critique on the movement of the work—whether he is satisfied or not with its gestural integrity. To Irwin, a painting's gestural integrity is unyieldingly connected to its emotional power.

An intense internal dialog is part of Irwin's process in the creation of his abstracts. He assesses every stroke and analyzes each part against the whole. However, in the end he wants his work to appear spontaneous and done "in ten minutes." It is a struggle to successfully maintain this balance. Irwin's ultimate goal is to create a work that is unified and consistent in color and physical terms. The science of physics has to be taken into account in the work—spatial displacement limits the opportunities that an object or element can reside on the canvas. Without taking the physical space into consideration, a work will be created with indefensible contradictions.

To enhance the introspection of their processes, some of the Ferus artists become practitioners of Zen and other Asian philosophies. To bring focus to the emotional element of his work, Irwin creates a series of small, "hand-held" paintings that gallery visitors can literally hold in their arms in the attempt to establish an intimate Zen-like connection with the work. Irwin's years of striving for perfection and precision in detailing his cars is now echoed in his works as an artist. It is essential that a painting not only be powerful, but that it also has its own energy and presence. To Irwin, the minute a painting reminds one of anything in nature is the pivotal time of its failure. Through his ongoing process, Irwin ultimately concludes that the straight line is the best possible element to establish gestural integrity and one with the least amount of possibility for literal association. By mid-1961, Irwin enters into his "early line painting" phase, which focuses on works having energy and movement but lacking any potential for literal or articulable interpretation.

Chapter 6

Chapter 6 Summary and Analysis

Irwin takes a giant leap between 1962 and 1964 in the production of his ten late line paintings. During this period, Irwin brings his own sensibilities into the process. Why does he like or dislike something about his art? What makes sense and why? Irwin is aware that he possesses the very positive characteristic of persistence. Irwin's challenge is to determine how best to apply it. Part of this journey of self-discovery results in Irwin painting the same painting over and over again during the two-year period.

Irwin takes his lead from master artist Morandi, who in creating a multitude of paintings always uses the same subjects—a set of bottles. Although Irwin probably was not familiar with Kierkegaard's philosophy of "The Rotation Method," the philosopher's conclusion that fertility is created through self-limitation shines through in his work. While philosophy students struggle to understand the ideation of a master philosophy, Irwin intuitively lives it. Irwin is striving to change the accepted aesthetic standards of art.

Irwin becomes subsumed in this transformative process, neglecting his social life and marriage. He begins to withdraw from the world—his life is in his studio with his line drawings. Irwin stares at his line drawings for hours. After long internal debate, he decides to move a line from one position to another and is astonished that an inch change in one direction or another changes the entire perceptual field. Next, he focuses on the optimum placement of the lines. Irwin analyzes whether his choice of placement stems, in any degree, from the "baggage" life has bestowed upon him.

After staring at his line paintings for hours and days and weeks, boredom eventually sets in. Irwin sees boredom as a tool to use toward change and accomplishment. To escape from the boredom, one must elevate to another plateau. Irwin strives to turn himself over to the canvas—it will tell him what is correct. Irwin's goal is to create art that leaves the observer in a meditative state, abandoning the natural instinct to intellectualize and articulate about the piece. While some abstract art can be "extracted," that is, thought and ruminated about in another setting and time, Irwin's work are only for those in the present. The meditative state Irwin strives for cannot be smuggled out and enjoyed later.

Irwin displays his line drawings at Ferus and at the Sidney Janis Gallery in New York. He attempts to adjust the light and room color and configuration to duplicate the conditions of his studio—to him, if these elements are not optimal, they are all distractions from the works. In New York, his efforts to remove these distractions receive criticism and become distractions themselves. Inevitably, the criticism takes on a personal edge as he is referred to as a bizarre California perfectionist and freak. This experience teaches Irwin that the main difference between New York and California

artists is that New York artists are into "conception" while their west coast counterparts thrive in the domain of "perception."

Critics have difficulty pinning Irwin to one style—minimalist; op artist; abstract expressionist? Just when they feel they have him defined, Irwin is off in some unexpected direction, although the trajectory is true to his own artistry and remains ramrod straight. As more of Irwin's works go on display and are sold, the more remote he becomes to them and the less interest they engender in him. He is able to cut the umbilical cord—he has gotten from them what he needs. He then moves on to dots and discs and scrim and is able to rejoin the world—his intense work with lines has adequately developed the self-discipline he feels he needed. His work eventually evolves to the space outside the canvass—the walls and the room. By the late '60s he creates rooms devoid of objects. Irwin's late line drawings become the fulcrum off of which he is able to launch new and varied works. The two years Irwin dedicates to his later line drawings is the time in which he emerges as an artist.

Chapter 7

Chapter 7 Summary and Analysis

Questions that arise within Irwin himself about his line drawings leads him to advance to dots. No matter how muted their image, the lines still read as lines—lines that stand in the way of the viewer's gaze and full experience. Irwin asks himself, "How does one paint a painting without a linear mark?" (p. 87). What Irwin strives to do is create not a color field, but rather a field of color energy. By painstakingly creating red then green dots, all closely aligned, on a ultra-white surface, Irwin is able to create energy. Not pleased with the imperfect edges of his dot paintings, Irwin paints his dots in precise dimensions that form the allusion of a perfect square within the canvas—drawing attention away from the edges.

A second way Irwin deals with imperfect edges is to balloon the canvas out a few inches at the center which is indiscernible to the viewer but successfully provides the illusion that the edges just fall off. Irwin spends untold hours perfecting the curved canvas as well as hiding the stretcher bars on the side of the campus—something that no one would ever see. In viewing Irwin's dots, distinguished art critic Philip Leider fell under the exact spell the artist had hoped for. Leider commented on the energy and the hypnotic state that resulted from gazing at the work. Leider felt that Irwin created the painting to be either seen as he designed it to be seen or to not be seen at all. Another critic, William Wilson of the LA Times, reported that Irwin's "paintings blush." A gallery displaying some of Irwin's work includes in his catalog commentary that, "The art is what has happened to the viewer" (p. 92).

Inexplicably, there is some violent reaction to Irwin's dots paintings. Some of his work is actually destroyed by viewers at his displays. He is detached from the paintings, however, and does not mourn their loss. The time spent during this period causes his marriage to finally end. Other associations are also broken, including those at the Ferus Gallery, which finally fails chiefly due to infighting and is dissolved in 1968.

Chapters 8 through 10

Chapters 8 through 10 Summary and Analysis

Chapter 8: The Discs (1967-69)

Irwin is badgered by the seeming arbitrariness of the energy created in the dots painting in their confinement to the canvas. Irwin's discomfort with paintings that encompass the edges of the canvas leads him to move on to painting discs. The question before Irwin is, "How do I paint a painting that does not begin and end at an edge but rather starts to take in and become involved with the space or environment around it?" (p. 99). His focus now becomes the lighting and the walls of the room. Instead of fighting these elements as he did in the past, he decides to make them part of his art—art that would dissolve into its environment. The physical dimensions of the room and its natural ambient lighting become very important to his work. Three elements—wall, shadow and disc—are equally positive.

Irwin paints the discs the same color as the wall and in such a way that it is impossible for the viewer to determine if the object is convex, concave or flat—it seems to be all of these shapes at once. Irwin finds a metal craftsman who creates perfect discs for him. He then paints the discs themselves in a wide-spectrum of colors and displays them—some floor to ceiling—in natural ambient lighting and thus plays on a myriad of shadows. Later during his disc period, Irwin is able to work with plastic discs, which provide the added element of translucence.

Critics and viewers find the disc displays ravishingly beautiful—a critique that Irwin did not expect or welcome. Some view the discs as symbolic, indeed some even interpreted them as mandalas—a representation that had never crossed Irwin's mind. Irwin leaves others to interpret while he contemplates ending his career as an artist. He has moved beyond art.

Chapter 9: Post-disc Experiments and Columns (1968-70)

Irwin becomes intrigued by the environment, the room in which the discs are displayed. The question that now Irwin confronts himself with is how to deal with the space itself. The flaw with the discs is that the viewers are still required to "look at something." Irwin wants to make art of the peripheral, the transitory. In his new studio, Irwin began to experiment with varying colors on its walls, lighting, air circulation. Irwin brings in huge pieces of plate-glass as objects of art in the room—objects that would all but disappear save a slight gleam or glimmer in an unexpected spot.

Irwin experiments with acrylic columns placed in the room and matching the walls, causing the illusion that they dissolve into the room. Unfortunately, some viewers conclude that Irwin has transitioned over to sculpture. To Irwin's chagrin, often when his columns are displayed, they are surrounded by barricades to safeguard against viewers

running into them—thereby stripping them of their near invisibility, their intended artistic purpose. Irwin does not stay with columns very long because of their inherent contradictory nature. Irwin's desire is to deal with the quality of a space in terms of its weight, temperature, tactileness, density and feel.

Chapter 10: Teaching

The LA times describes Irwin as "a leader and a loner in California art" (p. 118). Young artists look up to him as a theorist and ideological mentor. Indeed, Irwin had been a teacher at UCLA and UC Irvine during his time at Chouinard. Irwin approaches his students as individuals, not to be compared to one another or to some pre-fabricated ideal. In his teaching, he wants to understand the student's own expectations, develop their confidence and convince them that they can achieve. Also, it is important that students understand that most of what they will learn is embedded opinion and not necessarily facts—they need to learn to question and be open to new ways to look at that which many considered established fact.

Irwin also alerts his students to the importance of knowing where they are in history—not dates and times, but rather what has progressed thus far in the world of art. He also tries to guide them to become their own teacher and student—much like Irwin did in his own unique journey into the world of art. Irwin is careful not to hold his students up to his own personal standards. If Irwin feels he's becoming the students' guru, that is when he departs. Due to his fear that students will overly identify with him, he has never taught at any one school more than two years.

Chapters 11 through 13

Chapters 11 through 13 Summary and Analysis

Chapter 11: Art and Science (1968-70)

Maurice Tuchman, curator of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, enlists the cooperation of some twenty corporate institutions to place artists in an Art and Technology program. In this innovative project, some artists enhance what their art already represented. During his disc/column time frame, Irwin is contacted to join the program. He is not interested in creating a new version of his work; rather, he is intrigued with blending his artistic abilities and ideas with the knowledge and skills of a physicist.

Irwin invites a young artist, James Turrell, to join him in the project. Irwin and Turrell wind up partnered on a project with Dr. Ed Wortz of Garrett Aerospace Corporation. Irwin admires Wortz's ability to handle whatever challenge he encounters with ease and without prejudice. The three men discover they have all have an interest in man's sense of his own environment and a curiosity to learn how two radically different disciplines can interact within that environment.

The men experiment with an anechoic chamber, a device that shuts out all outside distractions, including sound and light. Each man takes turns sitting alone in the chamber for hours to get in touch with his own perception. One major result each man experiences is that, after leaving the chamber, the world does not seem the same. This shift is attributed to the senses of sight and hearing being cut off for hours, thereby building a natural dependence upon the other senses. Other experiments are devised and tested. Turrell eventually drops out of the project with no explanation. Perhaps he had fallen under the Anxiety of Influence—it is intimidating for a young artists to be around Irwin.

Irwin feels that the most important result of his association with Dr. Wortz is that each man radically changed the life of the other forever. They maintain a professional association for years to come. They work together on an important NASA project on habitability. Irwin realizes that the trial and error method is one used by both artist and scientist. Wortz comes to a similar conclusion comparing Irwin's dedication to that of scientists—both working painstakingly towards a goal for years on end.

One major difference between scientist and artist is that a scientist will keep a record of his failures and successes while an artist just paints over his mistakes until he reaches the desired effect. Also distinct is the basic way each one operates; the scientists approaches his challenge with logic while an artist operates in a haphazard and confused manner and relies on his intuitive nature. Science and art co-existed for centuries: the Greek sculptors were anatomists; da Vinci saw the two pursuits as inseparable. It is in modern times that the two disciplines have grown separately. As

science comes to the realization that there is not a logical answer to every question, it will come to rely once again on art. The two intermingle when a logic comes to art; i.e. the drawing of a cube (cubism) is created from an established technique. Researchers in science like Wortz and researchers in art like Irwin have more in common with each other than they do with the technicians in their own fields. Irwin dubs this relationship "the dialogue of immanence." There are certain times that a question presents itself that must be answered by all disciplines.

Chapter 12: Playing the Horses

During the mid and late sixties, Irwin supplements his meager art income with earnings from his stints as a teacher. However, his main source of income during this period is from playing the horses. Oddly enough, the days at the track yields more than money. It is the place where Irwin understands the distinction between logic and reason and thereafter is able to train himself in the proper use of each.

Some information about a race is revealed in a logical manner—the won/loss record of the horse and jockey, grade of track, health of the horse and many other factors. As the race draws near, other information, not especially logical, begins to emerge: how many people are betting, how much is being bet. When it's time to make the bet, the information derived from all sources has to be evaluated. Another element, a hunch or a strong counter-intuitive notion, may come into the final betting.

Chapter 13: the Room at the Museum of Modern Art (1970)

While an object of art is part of the world, it is often perceived as apart and superior. Irwin feels that art began as a highly sophisticated pictorial activity; however, by the time he arrived on the scene there existed the possibility of looking at the world as a continuum rather than as a collection of pieces. His experience in New York when his attempts to neutralize the room in which his art was displayed convinces Irwin that the same activity in one place (New York) can be perceived differently in another location (LA).

In 1970, the young curator of the Museum of Modern Art in New York invites the controversial Robert Irwin to perform a transformation of a small, abandoned room in the Museum. Irwin receives no budget for the project and must work after hours to complete the work. Irwin installs subtle green and pink lighting in the room. He deals with its irregular walls by rigging wires across its expanse that draw attention away from the imperfect walls. He installs other diversionary elements to soften the room. The room has no plaque and there is no formal announcement about the "display." Not many people visit it, and in fact there is no record that it was ever a display at all. Only years later, do other artists ask him questions about the display. Most did not like it but something made the memory of it stay in their heads: there was, after all, a record of Irwin's display.

Debouchement: Irwin reaches a point where he has dismantled art - canvas, frame, environment - to a point where he himself is dismantled. He does not know where his

life is leading, but in preparation for whatever awaits him, he sells his studio, his belongings - all his equipment. Mentally, he rids himself of all his former habits and practices.

Chapters 14 and 15

Chapters 14 and 15 Summary and Analysis

Chapter 14: The Desert

Over the last twenty years, Irwin had connected his thinking process to the art objects he was making. Now, with no such material objects in his life, he has to learn a new way of thinking. He is drawn to the desert and begins taking many jaunts to the Mojave. The desert seems magical to him. He takes many day hikes into the flat terrain and stays in seedy motels at night. Irwin feels that the barrenness of the desert will help clear his mind in his journey of discovery. Irwin does not want to destroy the beauty of the area by bringing "art" into it; rather, he decides to take its energy and magic with him.

Chapter 15: Being Available in Response

Not knowing what direction his life is taking, Irwin makes himself "available" at no cost to anyone who needs him. UCLA, for example, invites him in for lectures. Museum curators do not know what to make of his offer. They ask for plans but Irwin has none. He just responds that he will see what, if anything, he could come up with once he visits the site. With budgetary constraints in mind, this open-ended offer with an unknown cost was off-putting to many curators. Initially, requests for speaking engagements are primarily what he receives.

But enthusiasm grows for visits from the famous artist. He has requests from many universities where he would talk to students, stay for days or weeks, perhaps install a project and then be gone. Art students in the mid-west were particularly pleased to at last have exposure to modernism and minimalism from no less than one of art's masters. As usual, Irwin is learning more about himself and his environment. Irwin feels so self-indulgent in his own work that in offering his services cost free is a means in which he can serve society as a whole. A by-product of his endeavors, however, is that he senses his work has a certain resonance in the world.

Invitations eventually come in for his attendance at symposia on medicine, psychology, nuclear physics and any number of such arcane disciplines. Associations he makes at these gatherings endure through the years.

Chapter 16

Chapter 16 Summary and Analysis

Between 1957 and 1970, Irwin's work can be chartered by time and focused progression. However, by 1970, he has answered many of his questions and has arrived at an evenness of curiosity—there is not one burning challenge that is facing him. It is difficult to describe Irwin's work after 1970 as the work is impossible to pigeon-hole. His installations were made based on locale and many of the installations no longer exist. Irwin often operates in contradiction - he installs a project in a museum to make the case that the museum is irrelevant. When an artist departs from the orthodoxy of the art world, he is going against long established paradigms.

During this time period, Irwin works on scrim projects. Scrim is a semi-transparent material used in Holland and other locales for window dressing. Irwin is attracted to how the light plays off the material. He creates modulations with the scrim that produce eerie yet enchanting displays. At a 1971 display at UCLA's museum, Irwin redoes a utility stairway with new lighting and other minor adjustments. In 1975, he participates in the Chicago Museum of Contemporary Art show. Irwin focuses on a completely white room save for a stark black baseboard on all the walls. He adds a thick black tape to the floor to form a smaller rectangle. That simple gesture creates a giant impact among the viewers. Some were afraid to enter the room or cross the tape lane. Others reached out above the line to make sure there was no invisible barrier connected to the tape. In a 1976 display in Venice, he merely outlines with string a spot of tree-filtered light on the ground. Some think the string is the art.

Chapter 17

Chapter 17 Summary and Analysis

This chapter covers Irwin's relationship with "phenomenology"—the philosophy of human experience stemming in large part from the work of Edmund Husserl and his followers, with Jean Paul Sartre. When Irwin is told that Sartre dropped everything to learn about phenomenology, Irwin follows suit. What appeals to Irwin is the commitment made by these thinkers and the scale of their ambitions. Irwin is intrigued by the concept of becoming "reasonable," which held the dual challenge of becoming "responsible." Irwin sets about reading everything he can about this philosophy, sometimes spending all day reading, analyzing, and trying to understand every turn of phrase. Although he struggles with the concepts, he makes progress. After gaining understanding of the basics, Irwin writes his own view of the philosophy, "Notes Toward a Model." While much thought goes into his writing, it illustrates that his strength in communication lies in the spoken word. His writing is convoluted, mired in itself and rambling, providing a difficult read and with a lack of clarity.

Descartes argued that the fundamental moment when everything is stripped away occurred in the cogito - cogito ergo sum: I think therefore I am. Irwin descents feeling that there is a precogito - that is an original premediated perceptual field. Perception is originary, the foundation of everything, but also the most difficult to reach on an individual basis.

Chapter 18

Chapter 18 Summary and Analysis

Irwin's display at the Whitney Retrospective consists of a room with a large peculiar window through which natural light streams. There is a thin black line around the room at eye level. There is a scrim that cuts the room into two spaces. It is hung from the ceiling and, due to changing light and time of day, appears alternately to be transparent and opaque. Many viewers do not "get it"- when they enter some say, "Oh, an empty room." Critics do not understand the display referring to it as a stunt or a nihilistic gesture. Of course, to Irwin it is something entirely different - a way of portraying perception as the essential subject of art.

Irwin intends that viewers will experience a different world than was present before they entered. The room implicitly represents a journey to a new beginning. This concept is supported by a near-by display of aerial shots of New York City. Irwin ponders the possibility that the Whitney display may be his last foray into art. The art world is not what Irwin thought it once was.

Chapter 19

Chapter 19 Summary and Analysis

Three years after the Whitney opening, Irwin is busy with multiple proposals for projects for cities and universities involving massive, permanent on-site installations - the most ambitious undertakings of his career. Although he could have well disappeared after Whitney, he realizes that the world is not, nor will it ever be, truly enlightened and that one, out of societal necessity, is always drawn back to it.

Irwin submits proposals on a commemorative sculpture along the Ohio River waterfront; Fort Worth's Trinity Park; a slope at the Winter Olympics in Lake Placid; a ten-square-block section of downtown Los Angeles; and, an area adjacent to Lake Waban at Wellesely College as well as large-scale projects in San Francisco and New Orleans.

Irwin is no longer concerned with the art world context. He uses any materials and methods necessary for the project. It does not matter if others think his work is art or think that it is not art. The focal point of each project to Irwin is the space. He uses vast lighting to feature a project in Berkeley and is disappointed when the lighting itself receives more attention than the space which in Irwin's mind is the art—the lighting is merely there to enhance it. Irwin has moved from the traditional notion that the art object is "site-dominant" to the concept that the art is "site-generated;" that is the art is dependent upon the circumstances and physicality of the site.

In general, Irwin's post-Whitney works are substantially larger-scale, more expensive and more complex that his pre-Whitney projects. The passion of Irwin's career has been continually fighting the difficult premise that art is a metaphor of the present. As much as he attempts to remove the metaphor and have his art be the "present," art can truly be only a representative of the present. In recent works, Irwin has abandoned his principal mode of pursuit - the discipline of sequential reduction. In fact, his latter, large-scale projects are brimming with extraneous detail. Irwin, through his journey of self-discovery, has learned to deal with presence without the reductiveness - removing all things which he considers distractions from the art - that he had formerly ascribed to.

Irwin has always asked legitimate questions about the world and art. And although there is logic in asking the questions, the challenges he poses are often too large and too ambition to reasonably expect resolution. Robert Irwin has maintained a unique approach throughout his career. "He is an artist who got hooked on his own curiosity and decided to live it" (p. 203).

Characters

Robert Irwin

Robert Irwin is the first contemporary California artist to gain recognition on a national level due in large part to his unique approach to art in general and to his own work in particular. Irwin is a controversial figure who found art school capable of providing technical instruction but failing to teach its students what art is. On his own in Europe, he spends years on his trek to learn what art is. He pays no heed to established notions about art, discarding the works of da Vinci, Francesca and other masters. At least to his satisfaction, he learns what art is and means.

Irwin undergoes a metamorphosis in his journey of self-discovery to ultimately find his place in the world of art. He is at first intrigued by minimalism and abstract impressionism. However, he soon transcends those disciplines to undertake his own unique path. In his early and late line drawings, Irwin becomes increasingly uncomfortable with the line—that is, the object—being the focus of attention. As he progresses to his dot and disc drawings, he strives to virtually remove the canvas as part of the work and begins to encompass the environment—the walls and the room itself—in which the art is shown as an integral part of it.

Irwin's philosophical approach to art brings him to develop the concept that art is not "site-dominant" but rather "site-generated." In his view, the final object of art is dependent upon the physicality and locale of the site where it will eventually reside. Irwin wages a life-long battle referred to as "reductive progression" in an effort to remove any distractions from the presence or the perception to be experienced through his art.

Dr. Ed Wortz

Physicist Dr. Ed Wortz of the Garrett Aerospace Corporation agreed to work with an artist in an art and technology program developed by the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. Although at first dubious about the worth of the program, Wortz becomes totally engaged when meeting his artist counterpart, Robert Irwin. Likewise, Irwin is impressed with Wortz, who he admires for his ability to calmly take on any challenge presented to him. Like Irwin, Wortz has an ardent interest in man's sense of his own environment and a curiosity to learn how the two radically different disciplines can successfully partner within that environment.

Both men undergo a change as a result of their association that lasts throughout their careers. Wortz and Irwin join forces in a NASA-based experiment that explores the habitability of man in new environments. The two men retain a personal and working relationship for many years.

In observing the tenacity and dedication of Irwin, Wortz draws a parallel with scientists who possess those same characteristics. Wortz finds the trial and error approach to a challenge as another similarity between the two disciplines. Irwin considers himself a "researcher" in art and finds sympatico with Wortz who has devoted his life to scientific research.

Overton Irwin

Overton Irwin was Robert Irwin's rather cocky, flamboyant father who owned a thriving construction business in the twenties. His esteem was shattered when he lost everything he had during the Great Depression. The only thing Robert had in common with his father was sports.

Goldie Irwin

Goldie Irwin was Robert Irwin's mother. She was a young Mormon out of Utah when she married Irwin's father. She was proud of her son's art but admitted she didn't always understand it.

Nancy Oburg

Nancy Oburg, seven years younger than Irwin, marries him when he returns from many years away in Europe. The marriage ends in divorce after Irwin's neglect of his personal life over his work.

Joan Tewkesbury

Joan Tewkesbury is a celebrated scenarist who wrote many screenplays, including Nashville and Thieves Like us. She lived with Irwin in the later part of his life.

Rico Labrun

Rico Labrun was renowned artist who lectured at the Jepson Art institute when Irwin was enrolled there. Irwin was unimpressed by Labrun who, in his opinion, was overly concerned with political events and matters.

Irving Blum

Irving Blum was a young entrepreneur from New York who took over the operation of the Ferus Gallery in southern California, making it a fiscal success.

James Turrell

James Turrell was a young art student who joined Irwin and Dr. Wortz in the NASA experiment conducted in an effort to learn more about habitability.

Maurice Tuchman

Maurice Tuchman, curator of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, recruited Robert Irwin to take part in an art meets science project.

Objects/Places

Los Angeles

Artist Robert Irwin spent the majority of his life in Los Angeles and enrolled in his first art school there. Irwin attributed much of his success as an artist to the laid back atmosphere of southern California.

Baldwin Hills

Baldwin Hills was the working-class section of Los Angeles where Robert Irwin grew up.

Dorsey High School

Robert Irwin attended Dorsey High School, which left him with many fond memories throughout his life.

Europe

After his dissatisfaction with art school, Irwin spent many solo years in Europe finally discovering what art and the perception of art meant to him.

Otis Art Institute

Immediately following his stint in the Army in Europe, Irwin enrolled in the Otis Art Institute in Los Angeles.

Jepson and Chouinard Art Institutes

Irwin attended the Jepson Art Institute and the Chouinard Art Institute, both in Los Angeles. Irwin was disenchanted with both schools, feeling he learned about technique but not about art.

UCLA

Irwin taught art at UCLA from time to time to supplement earnings from art work. He enjoyed convincing art students that they could realize their own expectations.

NASA

Irwin worked with physicist Ed Woltz on a habitability project for NASA. Together they devised experiments on the ability of human beings to adapt to new environments.

Ferus Gallery

Robert Irwin had a successful association with the Ferus Gallery located in southern California. The work Irwin did there catapulted him to national recognition.

Mojave Desert

When Irwin sold his studio and all his belongings, he found magic and energy in the Mojave Desert, which he took with him in subsequent pursuits.

Themes

Reductive Progression

Artist Robert Irwin began his career with a bent toward abstract impressionism and then became intrigued with minimalism. However, his unique approach to art and his efforts to find his place within the art universe compelled him to pioneer a new and distinct slant on abstractism. As Irwin makes his journey through the repetitive renderings of various objects of art - early lines, later lines, dots and discs - he begins to have discomfort with these "subjects" being the focus of the art.

Irwin employs an approach to his art that eventually comes to be known as "reductive progression." Using this process, Irwin strives to remove all distractions from what he considers the actual art of his work which is "presence" or "perception." Distractions such as light, noise and even the object depicted itself can detract from the the intended experience of the work. Irwin's use of color is not to provide a field of color; rather, it is to connect with the viewer with a field of energy.

Irwin takes unusual steps to achieve his ideals. After years of painting dot renderings, he is dissatisfied with the distraction of the imperfect edges of the canvas. He would like to have a painting without a canvas. Since that is literally impossible, his efforts lead to a virtual solution. Irwin finds the exact measurements to create a perfect square within the canvas. Painting up to that measurement creates a false end and thereby virtually eliminates the canvas edge. More drastically, he creates a convex device that he places under the canvas, raising its center several inches. The result is that the edges seem to disappear.

Art and Science

The curator of the Los Angeles County Museum developed an art and technology program and invited artist Robert Irwin to participate. The idea behind the project was to learn how the two radically different disciplines of art and science could join forces and tackle issues that hold great import to the human experience. Irwin was paired up with physicist Dr. Ed Wortz, who at first was skeptical of the value the program would foment. However, it was soon obvious to Wortz that the dedication and tenacity displayed by Irwin was comparable to that of a research scientist. For his part, Irwin was immediately impressed with Wortz's calm bearing no matter what challenge presented itself.

Wortz and Irwin partner on a NASA-based project to study habitability; in particular, to study man's ability to adapt to different environments. One experience the two men shared in the NASA project was to spend hours alone in an anechoic chamber, a device that eliminates all outside distractions, including sound and light. Wortz and Irwin both experienced new sensibilities when they emerged from the chamber.

The men found both stark differences and similarities between science and art. Scientists and artists - especially an avant garde one like Irwin - both employ trial and error as a method towards a resolution. A difference exists, however, in the process as the scientist takes meticulous notes for future reference while the artist who works in the now is a slave to his creativity and therefore simply paints over his misfires.

A scientist approaches his challenge with logic while the artist addresses a question with a scatter-shoot mentality and relies heavily on his intuitive nature. Science and art had co-existed for centuries. The Greek sculptors were expert anatomists. Da Vinci found it impossible to separate art from science. Irwin envisioned the time when science would once again turn to art, ceding the fact that logic may not provide the answer to everything.

Independence of Thought/Self-Discovery

The title of the book, "Seeing is Forgetting - the Name of the Thing One Sees" alludes to artist Robert Irwin's philosophy of not labeling art or focusing on an aspect of it. Rather, to the avant garde artist, art was to be experienced as a "presence" not something that should not be named or categorized.

After attending three different art institutes, Robert Irwin's conclusion was that while he received a lot of instruction about technique, he learned very little about art. Thus dissatisfied with formal education, Irwin launched upon his own journey to learn what art was, what it meant and where his place was within the world of art. For the ten years following his art school experiences, he spent many months and years in Europe in self-discovery.

In Paris, he purposely slept during the day so he could roam the art-laden city by himself during the night. He not only took in "art," he studied the architecture of churches and other buildings; indeed he even researched the walls of buildings as objects d'art. Irwin discarded the works of such masters as da Vinci and Francesca as art. He spent eight months on the Spanish island of Ibiza without speaking to another soul. He wanted to prevent any biases to enter this time of contemplation and introspection as he journeyed toward a career in art.

While initially drawn to abstract impressionism and minimalism, Irwin grew uncomfortable with the focus that was placed on the object d'art. This dissatisfaction compelled Irwin to break new ground in abstractism by refocusing the attention on the "presence" and "perception" of the work within the environment it resided in. Irwin pioneered the process called reductive progression, wherein all perceived distractions including light, sound and even the painting's subject, are eliminated so that the experience of the viewer is not compromised.

Style

Perspective

Seeing is Forgetting, The Name of the Thing One Sees - A Life of Contemporary Artist Robert Irwin by esteemed writer Lawrence Weschler, is presented in the first person narrative. However, located within this perspective are a multitude of direct quotes from the subject himself, Robert Irwin. Irwin seems to have a remarkable memory of details and many clear recollections of his life and career—a testament to the same kind of attention to detail that benefited his work.

The author spent many days and hours with Irwin and therefore had an up-close and seemingly pleasant relationship with the artist. Weschler did not rely on Irwin alone to pen the biography. Weschler oftentimes followed a long, direct quote from the verbose artist with another view of the same incident from an associate or friend. However, there was nothing mean-spirited or controversial directed against Irwin in the comments and quotes Weschler gleaned from others.

The most important input, of course, comes from Irwin himself. Since the book is fundamentally about art—very little is included about his personal life—no person could better elucidate about Irwin's journey into the world of art better than the prestigious artist himself. Since Irwin's self-discovery included many years of solitude and independent work, much of Irwin's story would have been lost and impossible to include without the input of Robert Irwin.

Tone

Even though the subject-matter is a highly technical, indeed an almost other-worldly discipline to the ordinary person, Weschler provides a narrative that is clear and understandable. He does not mire the reader down in too much detail, although he does include enough descriptive passages to provide the reader with a real sense of Irwin's work and the challenges he faced.

Weschler spent a good deal of time with Irwin in developing his biographical account. That the author developed a respect and admiration for Irwin comes through without prejudice. The apparent good working relationship between Irwin and Weschler served to enhance the pleasant, feel-good story, but did not prevent all aspects of the story from unfolding.

The biographical story is accompanied by many direct quotes from Robert Irwin himself. It is apparent that he is mild-mannered and totally entrenched in and captivated by the world of art. Although he expresses reverence for his art, he does not hide the uncertainty and confusion he felt at times from the the challenges it produced. However, Irwin never utters a bitter remark or offers any comment of regret or derision for the perplexing and frustrating times.

Structure

The autobiographical account, Seeing Is Forgetting, The Name of the Thing One Sees - A Life of Contemporary Artist Robert Irwin, is divided into five major sections. 1) "Lifesource" has three chapters that cover Irwin's life from high school through his early work between 1946 and 1957. 2) "The Narrows (Part One)" has three chapters that cover Irwin's ability to find a niche in the world of art and his time with the Ferus Gallery. 3) The Narrows (Part Two)" has three chapters that cover his work with dots, discs and columns. 4) "Delta" has four chapters that cover his teaching stints through the turning point in Irwin's career when he sells his studio and all his belongings. 5) "Oceanic" has six chapters that cover the work in his latter years and some of his final conclusions about life and art.

The book is structured in a chronological fashion with no significant use of flashbacks. The section "Lifesource" provides the background and artistic beginnings of the contemporary artist. "The Narrows (Part One)" depicts the years Irwin began to become dissatisfied with the norm, setting him off on his journey of self-discovery. "The Narrows (Part Two)" describes the time that led up to Irwin's final break with tradition. The "Delta" section covers Irwin's satisfaction with his art and his expansion into other pursuits. The "Oceanic" section depicts how Irwin finally makes peace with things that can be resolved and those things that are not yet resolved and/or that may never be possible to settle.

Quotes

"I guess I'm as confused by other people's insecurity as they are by my security. And my security is probably no more substantiated that their insecurity!" Chap. 1, p. 4

"I mean, people like Joan, with whom there are traumas in their youth, one thing about why there are traumas is that they dwell on them a little, they remember them and think back on them and use them as reference. I never think about that stuff at all, and I never go back. It's not so much a question of not having a memory as not having an interest in going back to think about those things. . . ." Chap. 1, p. 21

"The process in creating that kind of canvas was like—what?—10 percent action and 90 percent ass scratching. First you prepared yourself, cleaning up and arranging your palette and tools, sweeping the floors, and then, finally, when you were ready, you faced the empty expanse of white canvas and made your first stroke." Chap. 5, p. 54

"'The more you limit yourself, the more fertile you become in invention. A prisoner in solitary confinement for life becomes very inventive, and a simple spider may furnish him with much entertainment.— Kierkegaard." Chap. 6, p. 69

"'Renaissance man tells the world what he finds interesting about it and then tries to control it. I took to waiting for the world to tell me so that I could respond. Intuition replaces logic.'" Chap. 6, p. 74

"I never approached them as an artist, because that wasn't something they were going to understand—hell, even I didn't understand it—and it only confused matters." Chap. 8, p. 102

"One of the first things I learned about teaching is that you have to respond to each student individual. You don't start with any idea of what they should be doing, who they're supposed to be or what their performance level is, and you don't compared them to one another." Chap. 10, p. 119

"I have strong philosophic reservations about what it is we are actually talking about when we used the word mortality, but as that word is most commonly used, I would think that the most immoral thing one can do is have ambitions for someone else's mind." Chap. 10, p. 121

"The wilderness is stalked by explorers without maps and without any particular goals: their principal compass is their reason." Chap. 12, p. 137

"But many people mistook the string itself for the work of art ('When I point my finger at the moon, don't mistake my finger for the moon' is a Zen aphorism that Irwin is fond of citing.)" Chap. 16, p. 175

"Many critics did not get it at all, either. As had been the case with most of Irwin's work since he undertook his sequence of progressive reductions, there was an unfortunate tendency among some art cognoscenti to misread the empty room as either a nihilistic dadaist gesture or a whimsical conceptual stunt." Chap. 18, p. 183

"And face it: it's real exciting having one foot on a banana peel and the other hanging over the edge of an abyss." Chap. 19, p. 202

Topics for Discussion

What experiences did Robert Irwin have at the various art institutes in which he was enrolled? Where did Irwin feel he learned the most about art?

Why did Robert Irwin feel the environment in southern California allowed him to be at his most creative? What atmosphere existed in the New York galleries at the time?

What were Robert Irwin's goals in his early and late line drawings? What unusual efforts did he make in displaying them at galleries?

What was Robert Irwin trying to portray in his dot paintings? What unusual steps did he take to make the canvases of his dot drawings virtually "disappear?"

What major transition does Robert Irwin make when he begins painting and displaying discs? Why is he disturbed by the positive reviews this work receives from the critics?

How does Robert Irwin approach his students during his stints as an art teacher? Why does he stay no longer than two years at any teaching position?

How do Robert Irwin and Dr. Wortz compare the work of artists with that of scientists? What are the similarities and differences?

What is "reductive progression" as it applies to Robert Irwin's work? Why did Irwin disagree with the traditional concept that art is "site-dominant?"