



# OUTSIDE THE SPECTRUM: POIETIC ENCOUNTERS OF LIGHT-MATTER

Sara Buoso

## Abstract

*The paper proposes a re-think of the poesis of materiality in contemporary arts through arguments about the agency, processuality and ethics of the material and its supplements. Informed by new materialisms, the essay contributes to the repositioning of the practice of poesis in an artistic context by establishing a new modality of Althusser's 'encountering the material' from proximity to matter to the mastery of techniques. By investigating the etymology of the term 'spectrum', the paper sidelines the logic of classical materialism that encounters affective dispositions in the milieu of materiality, which reaches into the space of language, re-presentation and experience. The paper focuses on the poesis of light's matter by introducing James Turrell's artistic practice, which explores the epiphany of a materiality of difference. Poesis comes to identify a disposition toward the potentialities and actualities of the material, where the sensorium of experience coexists with the logic of techne. While the frames of material practices interrogate both the originary system of materiality and the virtuality of technologies, poesis draws on these differences to cultivate a horizon of meaning and experience.*

**Keywords:** poesis, materiality, light, spectrum, sensorium, framing

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## Biographical note

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Banner image: Photogram of maggots, larvae and flies on bacteria culture in Edgar Lissel's *Bakterium – Vanitas* from his *Bakterium-series* (1999–2001). (Courtesy Edgar Lissel)

## OUTSIDE THE SPECTRUM: POIETIC ENCOUNTERS OF LIGHT-MATTER

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### The cultivation of *poiesis*

The ways in which materiality encounters language and experience have followed diverse routes since the question of the very nature of the artwork was posed (Heidegger, 1971). Beyond the transcendental ego of classical materialism, modernity marked an aesthetic shift in the modes of understanding material practices, acknowledging how the artwork has fulfilled 'its own autonomous formal law' as discussed by Theodor Adorno (1992, p.53). Away from the optics of metaphysics, contemporary understandings of materiality have posed questions about the 'material encounter' (Althusser, 2006) with an interest in investigating the interplay between material events and material relationships, aiming to recuperate an 'originary' attitude towards materiality and simultaneously reflecting on the system that determines the actualisation of presence. The disclosure of ontology that has underlined the philosophical thought in the twentieth century has culminated in poststructuralist and new-materialist discourses which from the critique of 'being as presence' revealed affirmative connotations of materiality beyond the classification of binary categories. In particular, in contemporary arts, Barbara Bolt, in her attempt to move away from philosophies of the enlightenment, proposes an enquiry into the agency, the processuality and the mutability of material practices (2007a).

Among these routes, this essay intends to recuperate the ancient practice of *poiesis* that, since Plato in the *Symposium* (385–370 BC), has identified the practice of making, which resists the time of the lived-experience by establishing an empathic relation with the material. In the *Symposium*, the voice is given to Diotima who introduces the practice of *poiesis* by arguing:

Everything that is responsible for creating something out of nothing is a kind of poetry; and so all the creations of every craft and profession are themselves a kind of poetry, and everyone who practices a craft is a poet.

(Plato, 1997, p.488)

Diotima's interest is to describe a practice that draws on lived experience through creation and

making, analogous to the art of poetry which cultivates the rhythm of the muses. As Diotima suggests, the etymology of the verb '*poieo*', from which both '*poiesis*' and 'poetry' stem, highlights a rooted association between making and language, materiality and thinking, further reinforced by Martin Heidegger, who, by laying the foundations of modern ontology through the essence of language, suggests a modality of thinking through poetry (1971, p.194). Thus, *poiesis* describes a practice that entangles the rhythm of making and knowledge, understood as the ethics of existence within the horizon of material becoming.

A metaphor drawn from nature may help to describe the dynamis involved in the poietic process, anticipating the modern understanding of material agency by focusing on the articulation between potentialities and actualities. Hegel discussed (2012, p.14) and Heidegger elaborated (1977, p.10) the metaphor of the blossom in which the 'breaking through' of the material reveals a process of creation and uncovers the 'false form' of fixed categorisation. *Poiesis* configures a mimetic practice of material becoming, showing its highest manifestation by adhering to the very nature of experience: as a blossom bursts into a bloom, an artwork (a silver chalice in Heidegger's words) is dependent on the approach of the craftsman towards the material (1977, p.10). By rejecting the hierarchy of matter-spirit or matter-form, *poiesis* establishes a modality of material encountering that concentrates the friction between differences, by which subject and object are understood, through a unilateral relation.

While contemporary approaches suggest renegotiating this distance as displaced in the *milieu* of heterogeneous encounter, the gesture of *poiesis* intends to cultivate the proximity within the material interplay by acknowledging the encountering of differences, formations and experiences. Following the path inaugurated by Heidegger, the art of making entails a redefinition of subject-object's relations by attributing value to the material so that through sensory, perceptual and affective experiences, *poiesis* comes to be understood as a mode of apprehension (Bolt, 2007a).

However, in the context of contemporary art practices the encounter between subject and object is often mediated by the disruption of modern technologies, further problematising the articulation of material processes and the mastery of techniques. How do practices of *poiesis* and technology correspond to the manifestation of a material expressivity? If it is true that both describe practices of making, what is their difference? How do both *poiesis* and technology rethink the relationship between materiality and meaning?

As Heidegger argues, the mode of 'bringing-forth' pertains to the practice of both *poiesis* and technology. In particular, he describes the process of disclosure and the revealing of nature (Heidegger, 1977, p.11). Through an insight into the ontological horizon of matter and practices, Heidegger anticipates the discussion about the autonomy of the material by distinguishing between material presence and the standing-reserve of all virtualities (1977, p.17). It follows that by examining the materiality of experience beyond phenomena, Heidegger draws attention to practices that allow an investigation into the very essence of material encountering. Between the ontological horizon of becoming and the manifestation of presence, the bifurcation between *poiesis* and technology shows a difference in the mode of articulating the intentionalities of practices. While *poiesis* emerges with the aim of making the material present, technology questions the truth of the virtuality of the material. Thus, the two practices are understood as a double reversal within material encountering, showing, on the one hand, the bringing-forth of *poiesis* in relation to the sensory aspects of materiality and, on the other, technology's reflection of the potentialities hidden beyond the actualisation of presence. As Heidegger further discusses, this distinction lies in the understanding of the term *techne* which denotes both practices but while in *poiesis*, *techne* describes the processes of artistic creation and making, in technology, the word defines a mode of *episteme*, reflecting on the truth of the material standing-reserve.

In order to recuperate the aesthetic aspects of both *poiesis* and technology, in the context of contemporary arts, despite the risk of instrumentality (Heidegger, 1977, p.12), Hubert Dreyfus and Sean Dorrance Kelly introduced the notion of '*meta-poiesis*' (2011). It describes the state of poietic processes better, repositioned within the horizon of material encountering outside the transcendental ego of metaphysics. According to the authors, *physis*, *poesis* and technology reflect practices that gather the manifold of the material world (p.274) and interrogate the resistance of the material beyond the logic of subjective domains so that the potentialities of matter can be brought out at their best.

From these understandings, this essay argues for the cultivation of *poiesis*, understood as a disposition and a system, with the aim to fulfil the active potentiality of the material. Drawing on the disclosure of ontology and the affirmative aspects of the material, the movement of *poiesis* resembles the deferral chain of poststructuralist discourses between presence and absence, actuality and virtuality. While acknowledging

the affirmative aspects of matter, the article examines how *poesis* describes an artistic practice favouring a material encountering, lying in the proximity of differences. Beyond the logic of subjectivity and the instrumentality of technology, *poiesis* follows the material articulation, contributing to the processes of meaning-making and experience.

By introducing propositions on the materiality of light, the essay considers a choice of works by the artist James Turrell (b. 1943), who employs a poietic practice for materialising light. In his words:

No, I use it (*light*) as a material and the medium is perception. Others use light to dematerialize physical material and I just take light in space to materialize it, to make it feel as material, something you comprehend and confront as something physically there and present. I am interested in the 'thingness' of light. Generally, we use light to illuminate things. And for that reason the only object will be light objectified or occupying space. I use material light to materialize this material presence as opposed to dematerialize that.

(in Gehring, 2006, p.254)

Between the thingness and presence, Turrell advances propositions for the materiality of light. By side-lining the idea of light as a conduit of vision and reason, the artist enters the field of poietic practices to explore light's standing-reserve emerging from the encounter with space and perception. From this encounter, *poiesis* and technology are understood as complementary aspects of light's material, characterised simultaneously by sensory and affective qualities. While matter and energy reflect two modes of expressing the material, Turrell is interested in the poietic process that allows light to be manifested and experienced through sensory perception. The cultivation of a *poiesis* of light follows the renegotiation of the processes of meaning-making focused on the disruption of an expressivity of light.

## A materiality of light

Light is a significant example for the understanding of the transition from classical to new materialisms, underlining the necessity to rethink materiality and meaning beyond the metaphysical metaphor of the heliotrope. In the contemporary context, light is displaced within the horizon of practices and experiences. From the late 1960s, artists began to explore the potentiality of light's material, advanced by the development of practices and technologies expressive of a significant transition in the modes

of representation, as argued by Peter Weibel, who examined how in modern and contemporary discourses light has been fundamental for challenging the metaphysics of symbolic meaning in relation to modes of configuring presence (2010, p.12). By interrogating light-matter beyond its vexed association with reason and optics (*lumen*), light recuperates a sensory matter (*lux*) by establishing a specific relation with the sight of perception and human experience, as observed by Martin Jay (1993) in the analysis of the scopic regime in Western culture. As Jay suggests, opposed to the rationality of metaphysical categories, *lux* entails an unmediated assimilation of perceptual stimuli, an objectified perception or embodied vision (pp.29–30). Beyond the rationality of metaphysical categories, light is a materiality articulated through the interplay of agential, processual and heterogeneous determinations, entangled with the horizon of experience. Between presence and absence, the materiality of light describes not only a material of sensory and perceptual manifestations but also a matter of inherent qualities and agencies. Drawing on Bolt's proposition, 'shedding light for the matter' (Bolt, 2000), a materialism of light exceeds optics and visible phenomena to recuperate the movement of its internal qualities.

From these propositions, some contemporary artists acknowledge the necessity of exploring a system of multiplicity which, by replacing the foundations of linear representation, lies in 'a nucleus of opacity within a network of transparent significations' (Derrida, 1978, p.283). A materiality of difference entails reconsiderations of the modes in which artistic practices and meaning are articulated, as has been extensively proposed in poststructuralist and postmodern discourses (Lyotard & Chaput, 1985; Derrida, 2015). According to these positions, while the foundations of language – traditionally epitomised by the metaphor of the heliotrope (Derrida, 1982, p.251) – have been analogously displaced towards the horizon of the material becoming, meanings and representations are articulated through the interplay of differences (Derrida, 1976, p.203). Thus, materiality and meaning are understood as practices of renegotiating differences in material becoming, showing how the symbolic and expressive registers coexist as complementary aspects of experience.

From these presuppositions, *poiesis* becomes a privileged mode of approaching the material world, embracing both the materiality and language of light, focusing on the interplay within proximities. *Poiesis* – which defines the disposition and the mastery of practices, techniques and poetic language – prospects

a modality for the 'primacy of positivity' (Althusser, 2006, p.189) focused on the affirmative aspects of the material despite the domain of form and transcendental thinking. In the *milieu* of the material encounter, the very essence of *poiesis* is reflected in the framing of experience, which describes an operation of gathering-together the heterogeneity of the material standing-reserve, as proposed by Heidegger through the notion of 'enframing' (*Gestell*) (1977, p.17). In the framing of material becoming, we encounter the difference and the double reversal of poietic and technological practices.

As a materiality of difference aims to recuperate a naturalization of meaning and experience, Turrell argues for a *poiesis* of light-practices, beyond Euclidean geometry and Cartesian coordinates, by recuperating 'a primordial connection' with light's matter that is as powerful in its agency, as it is fragile in its presence (Turrell, 1985, p.22). By superseding the object and the form of the artwork, the artist inaugurates a *poiesis* of light, developed through plastic articulations of differences, expressed in the fluidity of its qualities, oscillating between translucency and opacity, weightlessness and gravity, atmosphere and volume. Not interested in the classification of natural and artificial light, Turrell concentrates on renewing the encounter with light's material through the mastery of techniques, with a distinct interest in exploring how human experience is enveloped in these processes. By rejecting the mimesis of representation, his practice becomes a juxtaposition of poietic and technological techniques in relation to the grace of light's natural phenomena. By orientating the viewer's attention toward the apparent simplicity of light's material, the artist problematises the modes in which things are given to experience. His argument suggests that a rational, mechanical understanding of light's phenomena, does not convey the virtual hidden in the material's standing-reserve. In order to re-establish a primordial connection with it, Turrell argues for a *poiesis* of practices and experience, moved by the desire to fill the distance between the artist and viewer with an originary materiality of light. Turrell does not intend to conform to the canons of aesthetic judgement, rather his interest lies in the palpable experience of encountering light. In his work, light is displaced within the horizon of material becoming. *Poiesis* describes the practice of recuperating a materiality of light through the making of art and reflected in spatial and perceptual strategies aimed to re-invent the encounter with light-matter. Drawing an analogy with Henri Moore's sculptural language, it could be said that the practice of *poiesis* entails being 'truth to material' (cited in



Hiller, 2015, p.53), i.e. to its own specific qualities and compositional elements. Poetic practices are modes of expressing the varied and fertile processes of form inventions (Moore, 2002, p.104). In the contemporary context, the potentialities of poetic practices are informed by technology which opens to the horizon of the virtual. Influenced by the Art and Technology programme at the LACMA Museum (1967–71) as well as by the statements of the Light and Space movement (1960s), the aim of Turrell's artistic research lies in the exploration of light's materiality between the visible and the invisible. Focused on the encounter of light, perception and space, his practice is pivotal in proposing a *poiesis* of the sensory, corporeal, affective and experiential aspects of light.

### Outside the spectrum: Material presences

Among his first works, the series *Mendota Stoppages* (1969–74) is significant for the articulation of a

materiality of light in conjunction with a *poiesis* of practice beyond the logic of rational thinking. A *poiesis* of light emerges as mode of recuperating the material and the possibilities of configuration. The works, conceived just after the experimental series *Projection Pieces* (1966–9) and before the performative drawing *Music for Mendota* (1970–1), consist of a number of spatial apertures through a sequence of chambers in the artist's studio in Santa Monica. It comprehensively prospects an immersive and performative experience of light in space. With reference to the archetypal image of Plato's Cave, Turrell masters a space by exploring plastic aspects of light's material, investigating the frictions between the inside and the outside of chambers which convey a *sensorium* of light's material phenomena (Fig. 5.1).

In Adock's analysis of this work (1990, pp.89–99), the site-specific installation is rendered through a series of ten stages, counterpointed by the alternation



Figure 5.1: James Turrell, *Mendota Stoppages*, 1969–1974. Black-and-white photograph, framed 12 ½ x 13 ½ x 1 in, unframed 6 ½ x 8 ½ in. (Courtesy: Karen Comegys-Wortz and Edward Wortz Collection Photo © Museum Associates/LACMA)

of apertures and windows which, by filtering the light from outside the studio, simultaneously activate an inclusion-exclusion mechanism of the light entering the space. Anticipating the practice of 'sensing spaces' via negativity, Turrell directs the intervals between these apertures by closing off and opening light's natural system. In so doing light's material qualities – ranging from opacity, transparency and de-focused stages to soft, dramatic, coloured, textured, distorted, diffracted, synesthetic and shadow effects – become apparent. Insisting on the limits of the architectural space, Turrell interrogates the coordinates of Cartesian geometry – represented by the gallery's walls, windows and artificial fixtures operating in a system of intervals and differences that excludes vision – in order to make room for the expressivity of the light's material. From the darkened spaces of the studio's interior, Turrell develops a performativity of light's material, enveloping spaces and the viewer by showing the expressivity of material becoming. By rethinking the relationship between light and darkness not as an opposition but as a process, the *Mendota Stoppages* work to elaborate light's visible spectrum – traditionally understood as a vexed bond of metaphysical interpretations that unify logic, vision and truth under the metaphor of the sun – as only one side of the light's representation. As a Janus-headed figure, the term 'spectrum' can etymologically describe an apparition or an image, marking both the domain of the visible spectrum and a ghostly appearance (*spectre*). From Latin *specere*, 'to look', this figure questions the perceptual faculty of vision between conscious and unconscious conditions of visibility and invisibility. Thus, spectrum carries with it, its difference expressed through the notion of 'spectrality', a term extensively examined by Derrida in the context of historical-material discursivities (2006). Previously introduced by Goethe in his introduction to the *Theory of Colours* ('phantoms', [1810] 1970, p.1), this duality informs Derrida's speculation on the origin of materiality in modernity, which is underpinned by the inheritance of binary categories such as matter/form and matter/spirit, and leads him to argue for the displacement of materiality in the discourse of formations, processes and immediate experiences. By addressing Derrida's arguments through artistic research, Turrell's work configures the *mise-en-abyme* or the theatricality (Fried, 1998) of poietic practices. He interrogates the abyss beyond presence and the bringing-forth through poetic practices of light. Turrell's work supersedes the traditional dichotomy between light and shadow in which darkness becomes vicarious of light's material virtuality. Instead, the artist rethinks the opposition between light and darkness by making

the experience of light an objectified perception so that the limits between the visible and the invisible become a process of cultivating senses and affects. Derrida further elaborates on the term '*spectre*' to highlight the limitations of a linear representation when compared to the disruption of material differences:

What is the time and what is the history of a specter? Is there a present of the specter? Are its coming and goings ordered according to the linear succession of a before and an after, between present-past, a present-present, and a present-future, between a 'real-time' and a 'deferred time'?

If there is something like spectrality, there are reasons to doubt this reassuring order and, especially, the border between the present, the actual or present reality of the present, and everything that can be opposed to it [...].

(2006, p.48)

By reading the opposition between light and darkness through the notions of 'spectrum', the conventional aspects of this categorisation are revealed. However, it is by acknowledging the existence of such categories that the resonance of materiality enters the contemporary discourse prospecting an investigation of material qualities beyond actual presence. While in the discourse of classical materialism, spectrality could be seen as a response to the metaphysical opposition between matter and spirit, this intermediary phenomenon acts as a remainder of the standing-reserve of the material. In Turrell's work, the disruption within the manifestation of presence is sufficient to demonstrate the agency of materiality, as extensively examined by Fredric Jameson in his analysis of 'ghostly demarcations', when he argues that 'spectrality is not difficult to circumscribe, as what makes the present waver: like the vibrations of a heat wave through which the massiveness of the object world – indeed of matter itself – now shimmers like a mirage' (2008, p.38). Thus, the agential aspects of the material act through this resonance, questioning the potentialities of the material and augmenting its expressivity. Given a materiality of the '*spectre*', the poietic approach is one that is capable of re-establishing this naturalised connection with the very nature of light. It simultaneously draws on the performative aspects of matter through practices of making. By confronting an originary materiality of light with the development of practices, Turrell configures a *poiesis* of light, withdrawn from technology and projected outside the picture plane in the field of experience:

But it's this idea of inside to outside and where the picture plane is and whether there is flatness or this transparency in the space beyond, or it seems to be like something painted in front of the wall. That play is always inside to outside.

(Turrell, 2010, p.156)

By acknowledging light as *parergon*, Turrell elaborates a *poiesis* of light that frames the material field between the inside of spectrality/virtuality and the exteriorisation of material encountering. In this regard, Derrida points out how in parergonal systems, the distance between interior and exterior is marked as well as simultaneously joined in the interlacing of material traces: 'What's at stake here is a decision about the frame, about what separates the internal from the external, with a border which is itself double in its trait, and joins together what it splits' (1987, p.331). According to Derrida, the interplay of the *parergon* moves towards the intertextuality of the image between materials, subjects and contexts. In *Mendota Stoppages*, the framing-operation exceeds divisions through difference, initiating a process of making and experiencing the work. Analogously, as the framing of space disrupts the Euclidean geometry by affecting the picturality of light, so the system of signification is given by the interplay of presences and latencies. While the existing architectural space of the artist's studio is re-framed by looking at surfaces rather than spatial coordinates, the focus of Turrell's work lies in the articulation of light-apertures within continuous spaces. Both the artistic practice and the viewer's experience are thought as processes of making light express dramatic and sensory aspects. Turrell, intentionally, does not impose a focal point or predetermined vision but is interested in underlining the arbitrariness of such interventions, which conforms with the articulation of light's materiality. Turrell's frame differs from traditional window-techniques – with emphasis on the perceptual and prosthetic qualities of light – through its abyssal displacement of material spectrality. In his practice, surfaces, processes and apertures are thought to render the proximity of material differences. While the use of technologies of space helps in exploring a difference in the material articulation, Turrell proposes a *poiesis* of exteriorisation by cultivating light's material in the meeting points of contiguous spaces, allowing light's matter to resonate through chance and encounters. The artist suspends the aesthetic judgement to prospect an immediate experience of light, understood in terms of affective experiences, focused on 'faciality' (Bolt, 2000; Deleuze, 2009) or the proximity to expressive significations. This

aspect displaces the processes of representation and meaning-making towards the horizon of experience. By reinventing the logic of light and darkness, Turrell seems to suggest that while darkness is subjected to representation because it is anchored to the presence of an object, light reflects a precondition of vision, as if it were configuring a mode of being. Analogously, the meaning of the work is not founded on a priori categories imposed by the transcendental ego, but by allowing the symbolic to coexist with expressivity. The *poesis* of language becomes a practice of cultivating light's inscriptions within the becoming of experience.

### The 'bringing-forth' of light

While in *Mendota Stoppages* Turrell introduces a materiality of difference, analysed between the latency and the difference of light's material, the installation *St. Elmo's Breath* (1992) focuses on the 'bringing-forth' of *poiesis* (Heidegger, 1971, p.11). It shows aspects of revealing and challenging that pertain to the production of material encounters and meanings. The varied and fertile processes of form-inventions of Turrell's work emerge as entangled in material articulation. The installation, exhibited in the Georgian water tower at Houghton Hall in 2015, belongs to the series *Space Division Constructions*, in which the artist continues an investigation into light's perceptual qualities in relation to dark spaces. The work consists of an unlit space, a gallery room that gradually reveals a horizontal surface and a canvas-shaped aperture modulated by the LEDs (Fig. 5.2). From the experience of a dark space – better defined by the artist as a 'blind sight' to mark the difference between spaces (in Euclidean geometry) and sights (focused on the filiation between spatial fields and perception) – after 10 to 15 minutes, having adjusted both visual and other perceptual faculties, the viewer begins to materialise light as if emerging from the front-surface. Turrell rethinks vision through an embodied experience of light in space so that the materiality of light emerging from darkness becomes an objectified perception. The major aperture reveals another dimension of space and material, configuring what the artist defines as a 'sensing space' or a contextualised situation where two spaces share their sensibility. While there are no references to framing devices or architectural components, the viewer faces a field enveloped with light, emitting material intensities and simultaneously suggesting volumes and depth. Extending the latency and manifestation of light's material traces, Turrell exteriorises a *poiesis* of the experience of light by asking the viewer to cultivate a materialisation of light from perception in space which culminates in the vision of a nimbus of light,





Figure 5.2: James Turrell, *St. Elmo's Breath*, 1992. (© James Turrell, Photo Peter Huggins)

recognised by the viewer as a pre-existing vision. In *St. Elmo's Breath*, Turrell focuses on the bringing-forth of *poiesis* through an experience of revealing a materiality hidden beyond presence and vision. This practice involves the creation of an experience by investigating both physical and psychic engagement. In the making of sensing-spaces of light, Turrell emphasises the disclosure of phenomena that from the 'standing-reserve' of nature move towards processes of production. When describing the experience of the work, Turrell argues:

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 out to try to touch it. My works are about light in the sense that light is present and there; the work is made of light. It's not about light or a record of it, but it is light. Light is not so much something that reveals, as it is itself revelation.

(1985, p.43)

The experience of light in *St. Elmo's Breath* is poetic as it describes a process that brings forth the material

between the visual and the tactile. Catherine Vasseleu, who extensively discussed a phenomenology of light through sensory experience, suggests that away from the traditional metaphysical differentiation between vision and touch, light describes a texture that gathers together both tactile and visual perceptions (2005, p.12). In Turrell's work, this phenomenon, simultaneously intangible and physical, describes a process in which light beyond the visible light, becomes tangible, sensory, material.

By privileging the sensory aspect of light's material, Turrell contributes to the rediscovery of an originary dimension in the material world. It follows that the systems of signification and representation are not necessarily related to the inscription of the signifier, but that the process of meaning-making is expressed throughout the interplay of material formations. While Turrell's vocabulary belongs to the sphere of phenomenology and existentialism with a focus on investigating the essence of light's phenomena and their articulations into the material, the space between the material and the viewer becomes also a poietic process. The inscription of signification requires to be mediated through an expressive register grounded in the experience of light. Thus, between light's material and



the viewer, the space of language is the site of arbitrary connotations, implying the absence of a centre and the anonymity of these intersubjective operations. The *poiesis* of such material encounters aims to recuperate a naturalised relation between matter and language, lying in the horizon of becoming. By discussing the possibility of a 'worldless thought', Turrell partakes in a position that Derrida defines as the 'nameless act' of the sensory sun (1982, p.251): while no other language is given to describe the sun apart from metaphors, its action in the world is perceivable but not describable. Analogously in Turrell's work, the material configuration of light does not refer to literal or metaphoric representation, but the agency of its material is sufficient to state its virtual presence.

As other contemporary light-practices have pursued the reduction of the artistic field in order to pursue the experiential aspects of artworks set out by minimalism and conceptual arts, Turrell uses a *poiesis* of material encounter by understanding his work through the exteriorisation of the *sensorium* of experience. The *poiesis* of light's material is also a *poiesis* of experience. It asks the viewer to create the work in the material encounter. By repositioning the material and the human on the same horizon of becoming, Turrell applies a *meta-poietic* process for the interplay of material differentials. Opposing the entropy of after-image phenomena, Turrell interrogates the resistance of the light's materiality in relation to spatial and perceptual exteriorisations. In this process of delays, desires and expectations, light expresses sensory and affective aspects which, while naturalising the experience of light in relation to life, prospect a discursivity grounded in the specificity of events and relations. The bringing-forth of the material resists any conceptualisation or representation. *Poiesis* becomes a strategy entangled in the affirmative aspects of the material and – while exploring the etymon of its originary figure – pursues the exteriorisation of the virtual.

### The *poiesis* of mind

While drawing on the material, *poiesis* informs discursivity and artwork by elaborating the unilateral relations within processes. Analogously to the articulation of forms, meaning and experience are practices of making informed by material encounter. Turrell's light-painting *Sensing Thought* (2005), part of the *Tall Glass/Wide Glasses* series, introduces an enquiry on top of a *poiesis* of meaning and experience, by investigating the notion of 'sensing space' which opposes the transcendental ego of metaphysics in favour of the material (Fig. 5.3). Turrell describes the term as follows:

This is a situation where the space opens into another space from which it gets its light. That light passes through the opening and is diffused in volume. Because it takes all its light from another space, the sensing space is in some manner an expression of that space.

(1985, p.22)

Turrell continues:

The space I make looks out onto the space from which it gets light. I make the aperture, or opening, in relation to both. That opening dictates whether or not the light energy is diffused throughout the space or is imaged in part of it. Then I form the space to accept the incoming light. I form it in relation to the color that enters it, as certain volumes will hold certain color tones. When the volume of space is correctly formed to receive the color that enters it, it fogs up. When it isn't, the space seems empty.

(1985, p. 23)

The light painting employs an LED technique that was developed through to modulations of intensities and colours of the light. While the window display refers to traditional painting techniques, the technological medium employed by the artist disrupts the logic of the pictorial surface, understood as a field of material encountering, by being both the source and the content of the artwork. The painting is not intended to be seen as a perspectival frame, thus rather than projecting an optics of the world, it aims to produce an immersive experience by affecting body and mind simultaneously. In Turrell's works, light is not the medium of the visible, but rather the material of an immersive sensory experience. The rejection of any geometrical reference is expressed through a series of wall-interventions. Similarly, the exhibition display is modulated according to convex and concave surfaces that suggest to permeate an atmosphere of light within space. If the loop of computerised neon settings modulates light according to slow-motion, the simulation of the natural qualities of light is emphasised by a high-level of intensity within the chromatic scale, producing a dramatic effect that contrasts the use of sophisticated technologies with the transparency of the glass's surface. The notion of 'sensing' is significant for describing Turrell's *poiesis*, replacing the rationality of Cartesian coordinates with the material encounter between two spaces. In *Sensing Thought*, the artist draws on two perceptual dimensions, given by the light-painting and the light-space, and withdrawing from the differences between the two. Poietic practices open

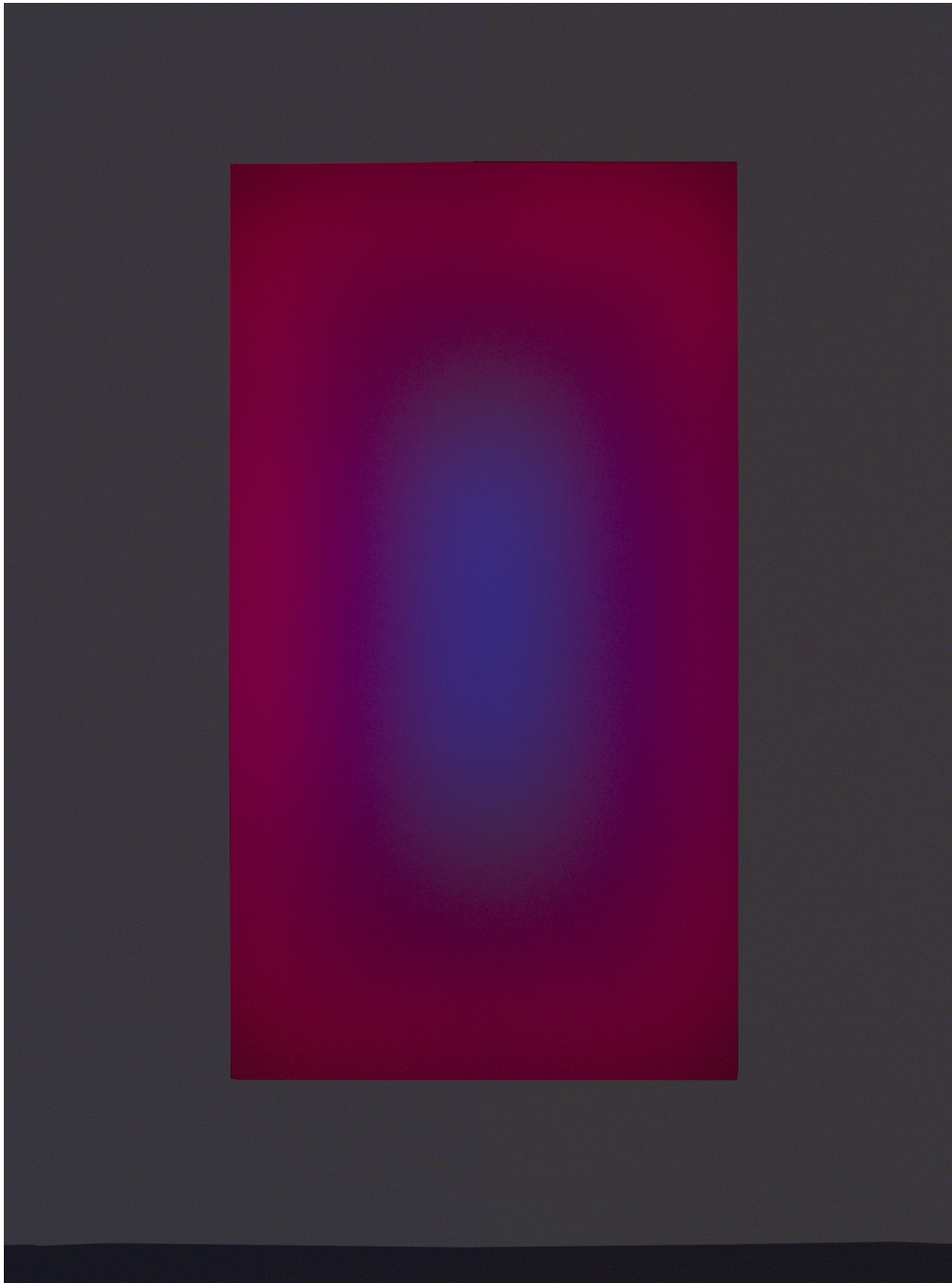


Figure 5. 3: James Turrell, *Sensing Thought*, 2005. Wood, plexiglass, computerised neon settings. (© James Turrell Photo, Courtesy Pace Gallery)

to the *sensorium* of experience, a term employed by Bolt who, elaborating on Leibniz's organon of sensation (Leibniz & Clarke [1715] 2000), argues that the corpus of material forces, such as bodies, perceptions and affects, constitutes a mode of cultivating knowledge, despite the binary category of body and mind. By reintroducing the entanglement of these two aspects, the system of metaphysical representation challenges 'by undermining the nihilist reception of art through representation, moving it towards a focus on matter, affect and sensation' (Bolt, 2007b, p.xv). Similarly, the processes of meaning-making adhere to the entering of sensory and material aspects within the field of language. The *poiesis* of light's material carries meaning by looking at the specificity of material determinations as immersed in the experience of the work. As analysed

by Miwon Kwon (2011), the idea of refusing to conform to the artistic object, is an intentional *manoeuvre* that allows the artist to develop the processuality and mutability of the viewer's experience in the space. In *Sensing Thought*, Turrell shifts the phenomenological perception of space by confronting the frontality of the pictorial space which, rather than representing a metaphor of vision, becomes understood as a vertical horizon of consciousness and memory, enveloping the sensory perception with the articulation of language and thinking. In Turrell's words: 'Light has a regular power for me. What takes place in viewing a space is wordless thought. It's not as though it's unthinking and without intelligence; it's that it has a different return than words' (1985, p.46). Through this statement, Turrell reinforces his attempt to investigate a naturalisation of

knowledge beyond the transcendental ego. In *Sensing Thought*, the bond between materiality and meaning does not necessarily involve the linguistic signature, but it can relate to the modes of existence. Opposed to abstract models of representation, the meaning hidden in processes of making, procedures and formations is in itself sufficient to validate an experience of knowledge. Analogously, Heidegger stated: 'poetically man dwells' (1971, p.213), arguing that the very essence of poetry lies in the acts of measuring and questioning, which constitute modes of thinking the horizon of becoming. By rejecting the teleological purpose of metaphysical thought, poietic thinking reconciles the very essence of the material world and the practices of making. These processes sit at the core of Turrell's practice, pointing the viewer towards an originary materiality of light and the mastering of experience.

### **Frameworks of poietic encounters: Materiality, language, experience**

In this analysis the dynamis of *poiesis* has shown how a materiality of difference, lying between the potentialities and the actualities of the material, disrupts the logic of a linear representation of light, expressing simultaneously the spectrum and the spectrality of material traces. Through these frictions, a *poiesis* configures a practice of creation, intended to articulate material encounters. The work of the artist James Turrell is paradigmatic for the development of a *poiesis* of light, focused on recuperating an originary relationship with it outside the logic of the transcendental ego. Between presence and absence, the artist develops a poietic approach to explore performative, sensory and affective practices of encountering light.

The analysis of the site-specific installation *Mendota Stoppages* shows how *poiesis* escapes the logic of Euclidean geometry and the optics of metaphysics to focus on the rendering of light experiences. By introducing asymmetric modes of perception, the cultivation of *poiesis* reveals the potentialities of the material, framed within a *milieu* of heterogeneous encountering. The differences between material formations show the epiphany of light's material between presence and absence, articulated through the encountering of space and perception. In *St. Elmo's Breath*, Turrell aims to investigate an originary condition of signification by looking simultaneously at light in relation to human sight and the development (bringing-forth) of mastery and experiences. By focusing on the plasticity of this process, *poiesis* becomes a parameter of the artist, the viewer and the interpreter. In *Sensing Thought*, Turrell considers the *sensorium* of light's

material which informs ways of meaning and thinking. By acknowledging these affinities, *poiesis* introduces new modes of understanding, superseding the binary category of body and mind.

The cultivation of *poiesis* reflects a modality of mastering the material by recognising the potentialities – lying in the horizon of all virtualities – hidden beyond presence. Technology shares with *poiesis* the condition of 'bringing-forth' and 'challenging' the nature of the material through practices, but while technology focuses on the 'standing-reserve' of material virtuality, *poiesis* concentrates on the exteriorisation of the light's material encounter, expressed in the interplay of practices and experience but beyond instrumentality. From the cultivation of this mastery, the relationship between materiality and signification is reconsidered beyond rational thinking, arguing for a naturalisation of practices and experience. The metaphor of the sun, central to metaphysical thinking, is displaced towards a material horizon of becoming wherein meaning is drawn from events and relationships. While recuperating the truth of material, *poiesis* inaugurates a discursivity of light, informed by the entanglement of matter, practice and experience.

By looking at a *poiesis* of light, the essay discussed a materiality of light between the visible and the invisible. Not limited to the spectrum of presence, this materiality of difference lies in the articulation of processes, formations and practices. Through the sensory and affective aspects of material, light is understood as a matter of experience in its becoming. *Poiesis* articulates the reinvention of its own manifestations in the material world.



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