

James Turrell—Night Life



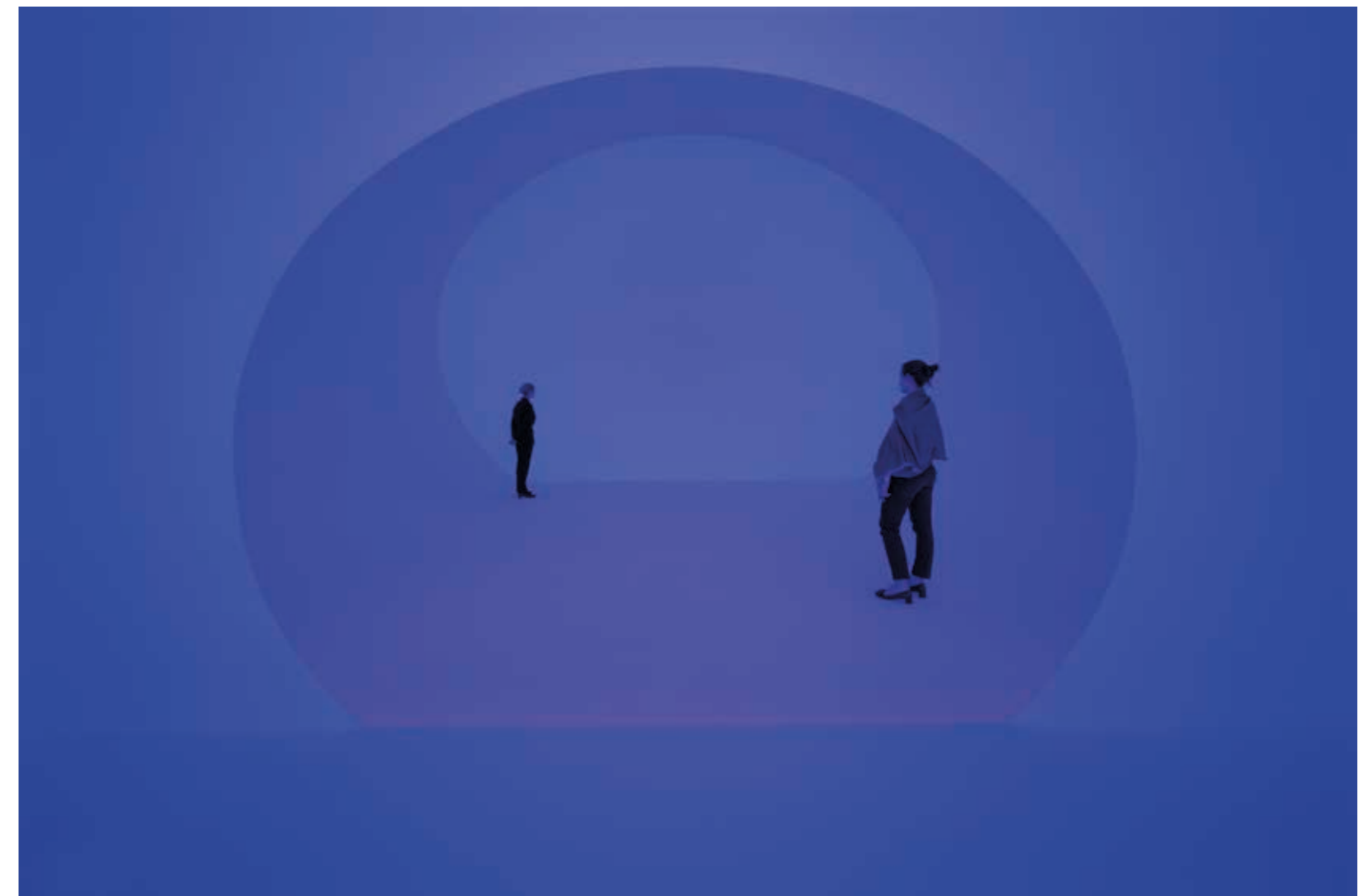
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**The light is looking out at us:
James Turrell's architectural light**

Diana JB Young



↑ Akhob 2013, Louis Vuitton, Las Vegas, Nevada
 ← Crater's Eye at Roden Crater, Arizona

James Turrell has said, 'Where light is or isn't creates space — more than the concrete architecture of space'.¹ According to the Quaker religion in which the artist grew up, the light of God is in everyone. Turrell wants his work to be light. 'Light knows when we are looking at it', he says.²

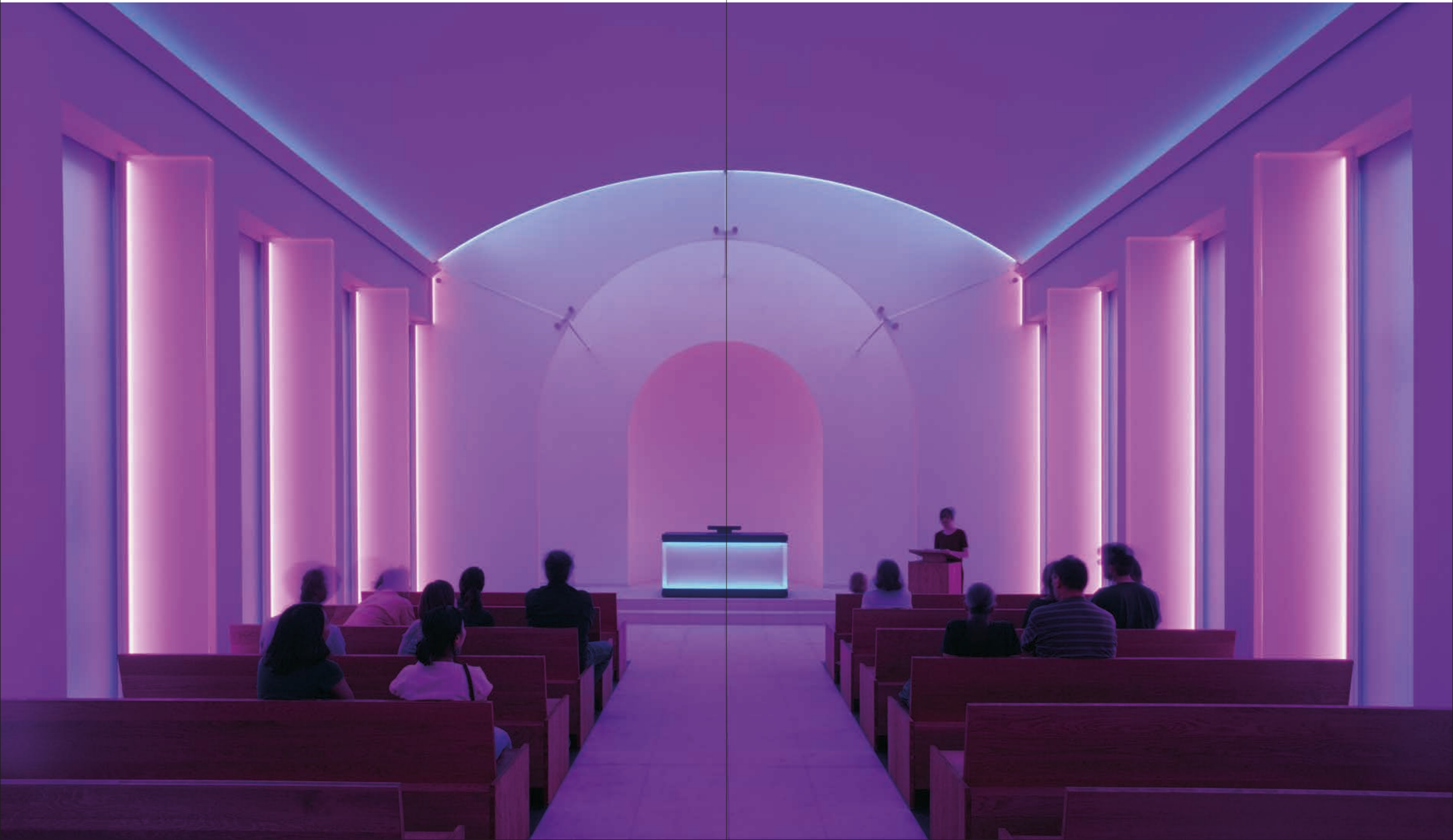
One of Turrell's methods for working with light is through the use of apertures. An architectural framing device, the aperture mediates between the exterior and the interior. But Turrell creates ambiguity by using the aperture as both an opening and as something that exudes light. In every environment, Turrell's aim is to slow down both light and viewer to achieve a meditative, even transcendental, state. This aim can be linked to one of the central ideas in his work — that the source of light is concealed, and, as a result, light appears to magically emanate with a uniform constancy.

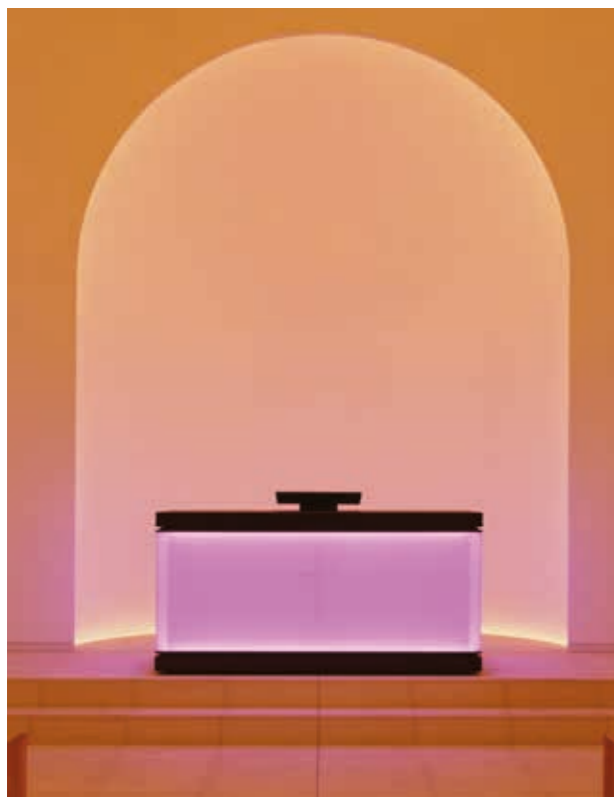
In his Skyspaces, Turrell uses light from the sun to ensure that the sky is an essential part of his works. Framed by the aperture in the roof, the sky falls to meet the viewer. Other works — the Ganzfelds, Projection Pieces and Veils, the Architectural Light works — he creates through light from sources that are not the sun. Inside a gallery space, Turrell can control light to create contrast between intense light and dark

shadow; however, his exterior works rely on the sun's absence, and often begin at dusk or just before.

Turrell's architectural works fall into three categories. Firstly, there are the buildings that could be described as *objets trouvés* (found objects), where the lighting is an addition to the existing structure. Many of the artist's early commissions for Architectural Light works fall into this group. Three works created in consecutive years, *MAKlite 2005* at MAK in Vienna, *Light Raiment 2006* at the Louise T Blouin Foundation in London, and *4 Eyes 2007–14* at the Kunsthalle Mannheim in Germany, all share a similar idea, one that is explicitly referenced in the Mannheim's *4 Eyes* title. Changing coloured light fills the window apertures, implying that the interior life of the building is in transformative flux. Only a building on fire would otherwise look like this. Turrell uses the windows to give the building eyes, and these window-eyes give out light after dark, rather than take it in as they would during the day. In other words, the light is looking out at us.

The artist has worked with a variety of different buildings for his series of Architectural Light works, but recurring clients include museums, galleries, educational institutions and corporate headquarters. In another type of light work, Turrell uses the exterior





Light knows when we are looking at it.

interior. As with all of Turrell's works, the source of light in the chapel is hidden. This work also recalls Turrell's Quaker beliefs — the chapel, a safe space, is free of shadows. There is no hint of decay here. The shapes are cleanly platonic.

The colour sequence at the Dorotheenstädtischer cemetery chapel begins with a cerulean blue succeeded by copper green, whilst the altar turns a rosy mauve. Electronic candles provide further spots of colour. As the sun sets, the light coming through the obscured windows appears as the complementary colour to the walls between them. Pale pink and pale green, reminiscent of a Giotto fresco, appear and, at one point, a dark blue-green, like a fir tree, surprises.

This raises the question of colour. Turrell's colour selections and their combinations are highly complex and variously bring to mind the numinous light of a cloud seen from the flight deck of a plane, rainbows, and the enigmatic phenomenon of the aurora borealis. In interviews, the artist prevaricates regarding his colour choices and emphasises the fact that white light contains all colours. Yet his selections also seem to prioritise local palettes — in other words, a vernacular of colour. In GOMA's *Night Life 2018*, there are brilliant reds and acid yellows, as well as full-chroma blues, magentas and greens, the intense colours that sing in the eye-burning brightness of subtropical light. These are also the colours of the swags of bougainvilleas across Brisbane, a city that is, in spring and summer, full of flame-red tree blossoms and violet-flowered jacarandas, colours that would appear harsh in northern Europe or North America, where the majority of Turrell's works are located.

Turrell admits to using LED lights for 20 years, but remains unenthused about the difficulty in controlling the medium, in particular, its tendency to produce spikes of dissonant colour. Neon, which he still employs, is better for mixing more richly, he says.³ Similarly, Turrell likes to control the photography of his works, discouraging casual image-making if he can. 'You can't get the colour and you don't have the sense of being in the space', he has said.⁴ This telling remark demonstrates Turrell's intimate knowledge of colour

facades of buildings to create screens of light from translucent or transparent glass panels. Several of these works, including the John F Wolfe Palm House at the Franklin Park Conservatory and Botanical Gardens in Columbus (*Light Raiment II* 2008), the Henry Art Gallery at the University of Washington in Seattle (*Light Reign* 2003), the Dornier Museum Friedrichshafen in Germany (*Night Flight* 2009) and the FIFA Headquarters in Zurich (*Blue Burn* 2012), share similar exterior cladding qualities with GOMA. FIFA Headquarters, designed by Swiss architect Tilla Theus, features an extra layer of metal fabric that acts as a light veil around the building's main structure. Turrell employs this layer to create an impression of atmospherics — like a mist or light rain enveloping the building.

Turrell has also created works in which exterior environmental factors appear to transform a building's interior conditions. In 2015, Turrell modified a small, single-storey chapel, originally built in 1928, in Berlin's Dorotheenstädtischer cemetery. The chapel belongs to a grand old cemetery where hand-to-hand fighting at the end of World War Two marked some of the gravestones with bullet marks, which they still carry. Using seamless, pristine panels of translucent glass — of a type similar to GOMA's exterior cladding — Turrell's creation links the changing colour of the sky at dusk to the colours transforming the chapel's



↑ *Night Flight* 2009, Dornier Museum, Friedrichshafen, Germany

↖ Interior view of the Dorotheenstädtischer cemetery chapel, Berlin, 2015



The light is looking out at us



↗ *Massed Light* 1997, Verbundnetz Gas AG, Leipzig, Germany

← *Light Raiment II* 2008, John F Wolfe Palm House, Franklin Park Conservatory and Botanical Gardens, Columbus, Ohio

and light, as the inaccuracy of colour reproduction in any medium alters both the effect and the perception of his works.

Like any object, buildings are translated through photography and reproduction. On the landscape of a webpage, Turrell's works appear as small glowing objects, the way they might be seen by a bird, drone or pilot. They almost invoke the sensation of zero gravity. Turrell is a skyman, after all.

Turrell animates buildings, but paradoxically he often dematerialises them too. *Night Flight* 2009 at the Dornier Museum Friedrichshafen is lit as though it were a cloudscape, and the Dorotheenstädtischer chapel as though it were a heavenly skyscape. The purpose and location of a building clearly informs the artist's approach. Rather than dematerialising GOMA, *Night Life* transforms the Gallery's exterior glass facade into a solid wall of coloured bricks. GOMA's architecture is somewhat extroverted and so is Turrell's work. 'We used to enter into the painting', says the

artist;⁵ however, in this work, one does not go inside the Gallery to gain the outlook. Unable to control the threshold space of approach to destabilise perception, as in his Ganzfelds, *Night Life* expands and spills into the adjacent public spaces around the Gallery.

Night Life is prefigured by the more ethereal *Massed Light* 1997, which was created for Verbundnetz Gas AG in Leipzig, Germany. The end block of this building, clad solely in a grid of transparent glass panels, is illuminated from within. In photographs, the lights appear as the strange synthetic colours of neon gases. *Massed Light* has something in common with Turrell's earlier window aperture works in that the building interior is flooded with vitality. That the colour of the light is always transformative is what makes the building's perimeter even more ambiguous.

In all of his works, James Turrell uses light as the mediator between outside and inside.

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Florian Holzherr is a photographer, based in Munich, who has collaborated with James Turrell for 20 years, documenting the artist's most notable works, including Roden Crater in Arizona.

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James Turrell
United States b.1943
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Architectural light installation
Dimensions variable
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Night Life lights up GOMA's south-east facade

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James Turrell landing his Scout on a gravel airstrip, 2003

