Actually I am not so sure that to look hard at a thing is to forget its name—Valéry’s hasty quip which says as much seems to duck the troublesome and ever-present tangle of sights and words. For, try as I might, I never quite break free from language when I take in a work of art by Irwin; studying it involves in some basic way either recognizing by name that which already has one, or else discovering that what is there does not yet have a name. Perhaps Valéry got it wrong on purpose, though. He may have wished to disrupt at any cost our habit of glancing at something in front of us only for the sake of identifying and classifying it with a term. To truly see such a thing, so the claim goes, is altogether different. For this we have to pick up on aspects of it that are unforeseeable beforehand, in spite of our familiarity with the category of things like it that its name names. But even if this is so, the word we have for the particular sort of a thing which is under examination proves helpful. As you set about viewing one of Irwin’s works, you can hazard names or descriptions or metaphors, and, having done this, thereupon attempt to figure out all that still remains unsaid. Seeing his art does not entail forgetting names, then, so much as verifying the limits of what they report. And writing about it amounts to settling on the best words you can find in anticipation of knowingly overburdening them. When you want to really focus in on Irwin’s art, it could be that you have got to adjust how you use language such that it plays a more noticeable role than ever before.

Take shadow, the name for something Irwin often mentions in his talks and writings. It is a common-enough noun assigned to everyday occurrences which we see fit to group together, and accordingly it ignores a lot about any single shadow—just as a word is intended to. When we choose this term to name a patch of darkness cast on the grounds of the old Fort D. A. Russell hospital building that appears true to type, we might next try to learn which details are thereby lost (fig. 1). After all, the name indicates nothing of the size of this shadow before us, nothing of its shape, its angle, its hue (does it sit atop the greens and yellows of the grass underfoot or does it stretch over the beige stucco and gray concrete of the walls alongside?), nothing of its value (dark at the center but toward the edges suddenly, not steadily, less so), its saturation (does the lack of light leach away most of the color or only a tad?), and its gloss (here a lustrous darkness on moist turf, there a flat darkness on dry dirt). In searching out the many qualities of a given shadow that the customary name omits, we may come to register a few which we would not have otherwise.

As one might have guessed, this word shadow has been part of English almost from the beginning.
And over the centuries it has been duly larded with meanings, several of which show up in hackneyed phrases like *shadow of war*, *shadow of a doubt*, *more shadow than substance*, *shadow of his former self*, on and on. These idioms leave off naming a dark patch on the ground that we can see, and instead turn to the nonvisual operations of metaphor—in each case making an implicit comparison between shadows and something else on the basis of an abstract quality (above, respectively: foreboding, slightness, unreality, and inferiority) that we are supposed to understand as being characteristic of both. Such leanings toward the figurative muddy and enrich the term while also conveying how muddy and rich it already is. We should keep all of this in mind when we use *shadow* to name one lying before us in Marfa, Texas. The word will overshoot the thing, revealing only a little about its visual properties and as much or more about the nonvisual connotations it purportedly shares with other things. But at least somewhat plainly so. That is the possible advantage of a noun which is very old, ordinary, and given to abstraction: we know from the start not to depend on it for a thorough account of the actual sight it names. And this wariness of the word, once we write or speak it, can serve as a prompt to seek out more than it tells us.

Now consider the far rarer name of another perfectly normal phenomenon that Irwin had an interest in, *schlieren*. Evidently this is the term for striations in a transparent substance which are visible because their composition or temperature or pressure, and therefore density, and therefore refraction of light, differ from that of the rest of the substance. Those wavy streaks swirling around the nozzle as you fill up at the gas pump, streaming above a candle flame, and drifting off the hood of a recently parked or idling car: all schlieren. Here in Marfa it’s those ripples hanging in the air over the sun-warmed land and roads (fig. 2). (On a side note, Irwin’s acrylic columns from around 1970 make something similar happen. They bend light, and from several positions appear more as a wobble in your visual field than as a solid object with defined edges (fig. 3)). At any rate, *schlieren* is fairly new to English, in use since the 1880s or so. And once we learn of it, we may find ourselves inclined to assume that with its scientific origins and lean technical precision, the name alone communicates all we need to know. Which is to say, we will glance only in order to identify and classify the
phenomenon in question as schlieren, and that’s that—exactly the type of looking which would have worried Valéry. Yet in spite of its seeming accuracy, schlieren expresses no more about schlieren than shadows does about shadows: the changeable particularities of the roiling motion go undressed, how quickly the waves waver, how many or few waves you see, how high and wide they reach. Rather, the distinction to be drawn here concerns our handling of the two words. We might be less skeptical of schlieren than shadow, and less likely to look beyond the specialized noun which very conveniently fills a lack in the language without bringing metaphorical connotations in tow. Or the opposite: shadow has worked well enough for so long that we do not bother wondering about its effectiveness, whereas the unfamiliarity of schlieren gives it a tentative and provisional feel that keeps us watching the phenomena themselves instead of stopping at the word. A strange new term can cut short your viewing, or serve to prolong it.

Then there are the commonplace things we notice that do not have a name in English. What is the word for the illuminated forms cast onto the concrete when the sun shines through the doorways and window openings of the former hospital (fig. 4)? They are akin to the rectangles and rhombuses in Irwin’s 2006–7 installation at the Chinati Foundation, and in his permanent work titled *1º 2º 3º 4º*...
in La Jolla, and also all over on clear days as sunrays angle into bedrooms and offices lighting up shapes on the floors, walls, and ceilings (figs. 5, 6). According to the dictionary, a sunspot is something else—a dark feature on the surface of the sun, or a mark on your skin caused by exposure to sunlight, and not an area of bright sunlight itself. How about a spangle or a speckle? Both are smallish and roundish forms, with a difference being that spangles sparkle and speckles are matte. Either word could fit the patches of light you see on the ground when the sun passes through the gaps between tree leaves, however they strike me as a mismatch with the bigger and angular shapes under discussion here (figs. 7, 8). A dapple? The term does exist as a noun naming a thing, although the verb and the participial adjective are more frequent (the dapples of sun on the forest floor, as compared with the sun dapples the forest floor and the sun-dappled forest floor). But again, too small and too irregular. If it is indeed true that the language has no good word for this sunlit shape and those which resemble it, then inspecting one gives rise to a third kind of encounter with a visual phenomenon at the old hospital. Rather than trying to see our way through the multiple meanings of a centuries-old workaday name like shadow, and rather than attempting to look past the specious precision of a newer technical name like schlieren, we may have to begin by just picking out a word.

Several options come to mind. One is to delicately stretch or downright strain the definition of a known word. Through repeated use we might better establish sunspot, let’s say, as the name for these shapes. Or we can borrow from another language.
Maybe we opt for one of those accretive German constructions such as *Sonnenscheinformen*, “sunshine-shapes”; or the Chinese 窗影, *chuang ying*, “window shadow”; or the poetic Farsi transliterated as *saayeye noor* and pronounced something like *saw-yeah-yeah-nor*, “shadow of light.” The thing is, native speakers tell me that these three are not widespread in the original languages, and that really no good term exists. Then what if we settle on a sensible compound word in English, perhaps *sunshape*, or *moonshape* since the bright West Texas moon casts these forms too (fig. 9), or what about *lightshape* to account for the orange and white glow thrown into rooms at night by the municipal street lamps in Marfa? As we think through the names of this and that at Irwin’s site, we ought to monitor our growing accumulation of stopgaps and stand-ins. Doing so is one way of observing things carefully: first you assign the most apt words you can come up with, and next examine how what you see differs from what those words report. It will be in large part because of the language we are used to if, in the end, we manage to sense in Irwin’s art something beyond this language. In which case, to look is decidedly not to forget the names of things we see, but rather to pay a great deal more attention to those names and their limitations than we usually do.

**AFTER MUCH VERBALIZING, SOME HARD-WON CONCLUSIONS**

“What we actually see is exactly what we’re oriented to see. We’ve set up and developed a very elaborate, abstract system of logic—which has worked—but at the same time it has really isolated us away from any kind of really firsthand sensate involvement.” This was Irwin around 1971 explaining how when we view the world we find it already structured by words, and so tend to recognize solely what conforms to our nouns and verbs and statements. A year or two before, he spoke of recent art as opposing this. “It is my contention that modern art has been principally involved for twenty years in a disengagement from literate thinking [so as] to place an emphasis on sensate awareness.” That sounds like the standard read of his own artworks as well: they are nonverbal and strictly sensory. Yet despite this general avoidance of language, Irwin and artist James Turrell and psychophysiologist Edward Wortz conducted several experiments...
on perception during which they reengaged with words, if only in hopes of hastening along the shift from literate to sensate participation mentioned by Irwin. Beginning in March 1969, they tested themselves and others inside a pitch–dark anechoic (echoless) chamber in the basement of Franz Hall at UCLA—just one of their activities for the Los Angeles County Museum of Art’s *Art and Technology* initiative—and fixed on the question of how perception could finally be freed up from language (fig. 10). “What I’m interested in is the artist’s ability to treat non-verbal concepts,” said Wortz. “With the project we’re working on now,” Turrell remarked early on, “we’re going to try very hard to make an experience that is nowhere near anyone’s capacity to verbalize it.” They wanted to discover a way of “working with non-verbal experience” by creating situations “unmediated by [an art] object, objective thought or structure, or verbal-literal description.”

However, the verbal kept creeping into the team’s search for the nonverbal. A test they called “Experiment xii,” for instance, aimed to assess the suggestiveness of language and its ability to alter perception during which they reengaged with words, if only in hopes of hastening along the shift from literate to sensate participation mentioned by Irwin. Beginning in March 1969, they tested themselves and others inside a pitch–dark anechoic (echoless) chamber in the basement of Franz Hall at UCLA—just one of their activities for the Los Angeles County Museum of Art’s *Art and Technology* initiative—and fixed on the question of how perception could finally be freed up from language (fig. 10). “What I’m interested in is the artist’s ability to treat non-verbal concepts,” said Wortz. “With the project we’re working on now,” Turrell remarked early on, “we’re going to try very hard to make an experience that is nowhere near anyone’s capacity to verbalize it.” They wanted to discover a way of “working with non-verbal experience” by creating situations “unmediated by [an art] object, objective thought or structure, or verbal-literal description.”

I for one find it pretty tough to crack the meaning of these lines; everything seems to come straight out of that wearsome version of stateside Zen mysticism, new-agey Californian through and through. Yet there is also a serious effort here to change how language works. A word can indeed be coaxed into staying more sensory than literate. Its sound when pronounced very slowly or uttered over and over like a mantra (“presented audibly . . .”), its color and its shape when projected on the wall or printed on the page (“. . . or visually”)—these are other varieties of information in a word that might dislodge its function of naming things. Or you can put forth a term for something but then fend off any further abstraction in language, such as the correlation with other things proposed by metaphor. (Recall *shadow of war.* This may get at what the team intended by their puzzling notion of a word that has been “remove[d] from any literary connotations” and which therefore takes part in an unconventional kind of “thought–idea continuum” with “no literate context.” You see or hear a word that names a sensation; an idea develops about how the sensation feels; this initial idea then leads to others within the same register of meaning that is primarily sensory. This, as opposed to our accustomed mode of interpretation and association: usually a word goes on “connecting itself literally to other words,” and what it names gets lost amid everything it evokes in the register of literal/literary meaning.

The team believed that a dictionary and a thesaurus would remain helpful for selecting object-words, action-words, state-of-being-words, and so on. They needed to piece together a curious sort of vocabulary which could somehow non-literately “correspond to” and non-literately “describe” the sights, sounds, and space you might meet with once inside the anechoic chamber. *Confined dull grainy buzzing dense blue-black oppressive . . . powerful* (figs. 11, 12). You would undergo verbal conditioning before stepping in, and upon coming back out you would receive a checklist of words to tick or cross off. Soon this approach was refined in order to get

Start with realm built with selected vocabulary, non–literal…. We can program people there using words to produce a thought-idea continuum which would have no literate context. The words can either be presented audibly or visually or combined somehow.

Find words through dictionary and thesaurus, and form groups of words as we like them. Categorize them as to: object-words, sound-words, action-words, state-of-being-words, place-words, sensual-words, etc.

We must choose words to correspond to the experience the people are going to have, i.e.: pick words that describe the space of the anechoic chamber.

Try to deal with the space the words make, as if each word had the power of a mantra. Remove it from any literary connotations, so that the word is denoting portions of your thought-idea continuum or portions of your mental space, rather than connecting itself literally to other words. Thus making the word an image-conjuring, spatial-feeling, sentient-feeling device.
lengthier responses from the participants. “After the time is up, the door is opened, the light turned on, and the person is casually asked: ‘How did it feel?’ to obtain an initial verbal reaction.” That question and others also appeared on a typed form given to each test subject:

**How did the room feel?**
Subject: Hard to put a shape to it. Flat in front of me. Hallucinations had shallow depth. On looking straight ahead, I felt light converging on the sides as if from behind, but when I turned it was even darker.

**Describe the overall field after the light went out.**
S: Shooting backwards through a tunnel. Blue-gray after-images on a darker-grey field. A shiny object to my left stayed with me then vanished.

**What did you see?**
S: Gray on dark gray. Rod-shaped blue things and lights swelling in from sides. Hallucinations (e.g., faces from weird angles—mainly looking up at them—focus on eyes and noses—mainly ‘Christ-like’ and ‘blond-female’ types) and designs (e.g., fractionated planes) and colored objects (e.g., a red and green eye).

**Describe the visual space you were involved in.**
S: Dream-like. In fact, it was so hard not to close my eyes that much of what I did ‘see’ was partial dreams. Up and flat at 5 feet or so.

**What did you think while you were in the room?**
S: Of falling asleep (felt guilty about this); of trying to think about these questions which I knew I would have to answer (i.e., concentrating on seeing and hearing mainly).

With the conditioning and the checklists and then this, a questionnaire of all things, it begins to seem as if the team had been pursuing the very opposite of their stated intentions. Every stage of their experiment wound up redoubling the “literate context” and “verbal-literal description” at work. Even they had doubts, according to dashed-off notes from a conversation with Turrell in April 1969:

now using ucla anachoid chamber to test ourselves and 26 students. at 1st we gave them a questionnaire to describe their experiences. then we decided all we were measuring was their ability to describe their experiences, not the experience. also destroyed the effect of what happened.

Yes, a description of something is not the thing itself. But there must be more to it than that. As Turrell said, the experiment offered a chance to see how ably one managed to bring forth names for new, outlandish, and perhaps ultimately nonverbal phenomena. What the team may have missed, or more likely considered and then decided against, is that this is useful information. The idea appears reasonable enough, though. The language you settle on when speaking and writing about an experience attests to the ease or the difficulty of doing so, and that in turn bears out (rather than destroys) the effects it has had on you.

For example, details such as angled faces of Christs and blondes preserve some sense of the harrowing peculiarity of hallucinations, a term and a theme which today one might otherwise shrug off after so many breezy references out there to the ’60s acid subculture. And yet any success we have in imagining the imagery recounted by the subjects in their questionnaires also means that it is strange only up to a point. The red and green eye requires no more than a substitution of an ordinary brown iris, black pupil, and white sclera with more chromatic colors. The swelling brightness in your periphery; the shiny object which is not actually there but lingers just the same until it abruptly vanishes; the gray before you when it ought to be the blackest black in a room with no light—these sights are odd indeed, but they seem more or less successfully articulated in the language we know.

Other things mentioned here do not come through as readily when put into words. The “designs” consisting of “fractionated” (I had to go to the dictionary: fragmented, segmented) “planes” are impossible for me to picture since I do not quite understand what is being said. The same goes for the “blue-gray after-images on a darker-grey field” and the “gray on dark gray [along with] rod-shaped blue things.” I cannot really envision in my mind’s eye what either statement reports; and furthermore I wonder whether these are two tries at capturing the same visual phenomenon, which, if true, would imply a curious discrepancy between them: what starts out as only one kind of thing on dark gray

**A WAY TO LOOK AT THINGS BY NOT FORGETTING THEIR NAMES**
in the first response ("blue-gray after-images," mixed-color nebulous forms) appears to become two separate kinds of things on dark gray in the second response (a completely formless lighter gray on the one hand, and discrete blue rods on the other). Then notice the degree to which the participant felt it necessary to hedge her answers when she wrote that much of what she did ‘see’ was partial dreams. She and we remain unsure of even the most basic facts, like precisely what she saw and, moreover, whether what she saw was in reality seen, or dreamed, or both, or something else.10 Following his own sessions in the anechoic chamber, Irwin too recalled phenomena that break down the distinctions between memory, sensation, hallucination, and other such terms:

You get a certain amount of retinal playback. In your ears you feel as if you’re totally underwater because the room is absolutely packed with soundlessness—it is not empty at all, you can cut it with a knife. In listening to that soundlessness, you also begin to pick up reads of your own body. You hear your heartbeat and so on and so forth. And you actually hear, I think, the electrical energy of your brain.11

Irwin arrived at the conclusion that “it’s not a verbal experience” largely by trying to verbalize the experience, as here.12 Newly coined or unusual sciency phrases (retinal playback), similes (as if underwater), idioms (cut with a knife), and colloquialisms (pick up reads of) are among the various constructions he tried in an effort to offer some kind of account of the strange sights and sounds he had encountered. Besides naming and describing and alluding, Irwin’s words also communicate which of his sensations fit most uneasily into language. “We would do these things together,” he explained, “and then begin to talk about them. [But] when you spend this long playing with non-verbal forms, it gets hard to talk. You don’t have a desire to talk about it. It doesn’t work, and it doesn’t feel right.”13 The team’s research always addressed verbal expression as much as nonverbal experience, and had to, given that where one ends the other begins. No surprise then that throughout the tests, Irwin, Turrell, and Wortz stayed knee-deep in language. By doing so, they came to find out how and why their words kept falling short of the things they felt firsthand.
One reason Irwin gave for why words didn’t work and didn’t feel right is that they are physical. Possibly he was insisting how once spoken or written they themselves become audible or visible phenomena as in Experiment x11, and also how when arranged one after the next into a sentence whose meaning unfolds step by step, nouns and adjectives and verbs take on those other physical dimensions of time and space. These properties of their own will always get in the way of conveying information about some other thing in the world and its physical properties. Now as for this information about an object or a phenomenon that one might wish to make known, it could be called nonphysical in a certain manner of thinking. It exists as a feeling more than anything else and has little to do with what Irwin saw as the particular physical form of words. Here he is, saying a bit more on the notion:

The areas of extended perceptual research we got into have to do with the ability to handle information in a non-physical form [as opposed to handling it in a physical form like a word]. Anything that has a (symbolic) dimension [as words do]—even our own description of matter and energy—the [se kinds of] physical descriptions defy the form [of the matter or energy or other phenomenon under consideration]. You can’t talk about a non-physical being with a physical symbol.

Although of course without words you can’t talk at all. On occasion Irwin turned this dilemma to his advantage by approaching a subject through the physical/verbal form of its name and that word’s defiance of the nonphysical/nonverbal information it was supposed to impart. In August 1969 Irwin and Turrell sat in on a meeting that Wortz had set up with scientists and other colleagues. The contribution of the two artists consisted of taking issue with what those in the room meant when using the name for the topic of discussion, habitability. “We corrupted the meeting,” Irwin remembered, “because our definition of habitability completely altered the premise they were assuming. We broadened the term.”

In May 1970, at the First National Symposium on Habitability in Venice Beach, Irwin drew attention to how the speakers stumbled over another term, humanism (fig. 13):

I was struck by the fact that as each one got up to the point of humanism, they found words somewhat inadequate and they began in one case to laugh a little bit, Mr. Izumi became reluctant to hold himself to any one verbal phrase, and as Dr. Pande put it he felt the necessity to make 40 statements at one time all of them coming out together somehow.

The conclusion Irwin drew from this was that “verbal communication—putting forth ideas abstractly—is somehow the seat of the problem in making progress in habitability.” Maybe. But when gazing at the blue of the sky, running experiments with an anechoic chamber, and defining hazy concepts like habitability and humanism, Irwin’s focus on language suggests that he might have been closing in on a way to make use of its shortcomings, even if unknowingly. The finding that words cannot get at a thing counts as a discovery of some sort about it, in short, that whatever it is is not well enough understood for one to choose words with ease. And so the thing has to be talked about differently. Rather than trusting or foregoing or forgetting the name of it, we might view that word as a physical form whose most important role is to mark out where some amount of nonphysical information must be missing. It seems to be a question of looking at, then through, and then past a name: by staring at a word we will come to notice it actually sitting there on the page; from this, we may gain a clearer sense of the limitations of identifying something in the world according to the bunched-up little black marks which form its name; and with that, we can
start over by looking at the thing through its name primarily in order to catch sight of what the word does not manage to make clear—what we see of a thing in front of us that is beyond the reach of its name.

* * *

Irwin did not explain exactly how he and Turrell broadened the definition of the term *habitability* in that earlier meeting, but perhaps several of those around the table thought of it as addressing only the most basic factors in keeping humans alive and able to accomplish their missions in extreme conditions: how much air, food, water, sleep, space, and what temperatures are necessary. Irwin’s ideas tended elsewhere as Wortz knew:

Right now we’re establishing some criteria for a spacecraft. One of the things that Bob has done is to help us. We’ve looked at the problem of providing a very enriched environment…. He was thinking that portions of the spacecraft should be designed or painted to have an appropriate suchness for their function. He’s designed us a little oven…. So we have the first tentative art input into a spacecraft.40

What Wortz labeled *suchness* refers in part to the “visual richness” of the dichroic paint on the oven, that is to say, the “apparent changes in the color of the object as the observer’s perspective changes,” in this case from warm tan when standing over the oven to cool green when sitting down beside it (figs. 14, 15).41 “Forms are enhanced by this technique; the edges appear bold against one background and then become soft as the color shifts to match the major area.”41 It sounds like training for the eyes, a workout to ensure that they stay limber and adaptable for the critical task of sighting things from a space capsule.43 The enriching suchness would come about in other ways too. For example, the oven might raise larger philosophical issues for one to consider. The stark color-switching characteristic of dichroic paint may be unusual, yet the hue and saturation and value of any object in the galley would alter as you moved in relation to it and the light source. It could be interesting to mull over whether variations of this type are truly “apparent”: does color exist as a stable and intrinsic property of the oven’s paintjob—perceived changes to which are no more than apparent—or do the tan and the green exist only as perceived, only as appearance, which would imply that there cannot be anything other than so-called apparent changes when it comes to color? And then also figuring out causality. According to planning documents, a timer in the appliance would make an indicator light flick on and a buzzer beep; maybe as with most microwave ovens, a component known as a magnetron would emit radiation and rapidly spin molecules in the food thereby heating it; and as you moved around, the paint would respond as if it too were somehow electrical, binary, on/off, tan/green.44 Although in fact the two colors would have nothing whatever to do with those other operations, you might have had to think through and test the misleading impression of a correspondence before being able to confidently reject it as false—all of which amounts to a complicated, rich encounter for one to have with an oven over the duration of a prolonged mission.

But really *suchness* was Wortz’s term for a quality that fit with a larger principle of Irwin’s. For him “everything has to feel just right,” as Wortz
put it, an idea Irwin probably came up with in the course of his own practice and which Wortz recalled the artist comparing to the aesthetics of customized cars—“guys massaging portions of the machine that no one will ever see, just because it feels right to have it all just right.” Except what does that mean, to feel right? Irwin knew how in seeking to answer this question one may get cornered into tossing out still more words in order to “try to explain what it feels [like] to feel right.”

He gave it a go regardless: “When I say, ‘It feels right,’ what I’ve done is weigh it on some scale, some reasoning scale.” Naturally we next have to ask what this concept of a reasoning scale is all about. Things have gotten vague. The added words offer few gains in clarity and instead compound incoherence. Here at the limits of language we have to see if we can grasp what suchness and feeling right and weighing on a reasoning scale might be intended to express, while also staying aware that these are abstractions filling in for information that goes beyond them. This point of discovery is reached in every respect by way of language, by attempting to find names for it that we see and feel, and not by forgetting those names.

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NOTES

Shortened citations in the notes below include a reference in parentheses to the note with the first and full citation.

3 The context of Valéry’s phrase is somewhat complicated. Bringing to a close his book on Edgar Degas (and dance, and drawing, and politics, and Stéphane Mallarmé,…), Valéry faults Blaise Pascal for its "reduc[ing] [painting] to the ‘vanity’ of laboriously pursuing the resemblance of things whose [actual, unpainted] appearance is, in and of itself without interest” [la négligence à la raison de pursueur laborueuse la ressemblance des choses dont on n’a d’ailleurs même et sans intérêt]. “Which proves,” Valéry continues, that Pascal “did not know how to look, that is to say, to forget the names of the things that one sees” [ce qui prouve qu’il ne savait pas regarder, c’est-à-dire oublier les noms des choses que l’on voit]. Valéry, Degas, dance, dessin (note 1), 161. The quote from Pascal’s 1666 Pensées that Valéry has in mind goes, “What vanity is painting, which attracts admiration for the resemblance to things whose originals we do not admire!” [Quelle comité que la peinture qui attise l’admiration par la ressemblance des choses, dont on n’admire point les originaux!]. Blaise Pascal, Œuvres complètes, ed. Louis Lafuma (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1961), 504–505.
4 Lawrence Weschler borrowed Valéry’s words for the title and postscript of his celebrated biography of Robert Irwin, and wrote that the “aphorism … had once served as an apt characterization of Irwin’s entire course up to a certain point.” I adopted a line of Paul Valéry’s (seeing is forgetting the name of the thing one sees) as the book’s title, in part because that kind of struck-dumb-adorability was precisely the sort of experience to which Irwin’s works were increasingly appealing, but also because my text constituted a record of all the usual components of artmaking—image, line, focus, frame, signature, naming, the requirement of making itself—that Irwin had sequentially transformed, to bracket out, to forget, before he himself was able to see. Being here now is what Irwin is all about—getting here now, and not talking about it. And yet ‘getting here’ breeds talk—his, ours—and there is in Irwin’s work all sorts of stuff to talk about. As I say, the entire enterprise back in contradiction.

Lawrence Weschler, ‘In a Desert of Pure Feeling,’ The New Yorker, June 7, 1993; 81, 88, empha-


The nested problem here is that Pascal might be misconstruing painting, and Valéry misreading Pascal, and Weschler misreading Valléry. To start with, Pascal detects a basic form of interpretation that goes beyond them.

So, the。“aphorism” has nothing to do with Irwin’s interest in paying attention not to things in a painting but instead to things in the world. Through a series of interpretations that more than anything else seem to repackage what was largely a question of intent, an interest in searching for likenesses as you view real objects although those real objects may resemble the appearance of painted images. In this essay, then, I consider the phrase that emerges from Weschler’s fundamental alteration of Valéry’s pricky counter to Pascal’s questionable understanding of painting, largely because, as Weschler wrote, the line is sometimes taken to be an apt characterization of Irwin’s art and practice.


6 Irwin listed “schlieren images” as another topic of interest in the “Space craft cabin / support environment” document (note 4), second page; and Livingston, “Robert Irwin / James Turrell” (note 5), 128. With regard to the word’s rarity, Mark Davies’ online “Corpus of Contemporary American English” returns over thirty thousand uses of shadeou in various forms over the covered date range from 1990 to 2006. Irwin also used eight uses of shaden (and none at all of the singular schlieren) listed in the Oxford English Dictionary (note 5), 1465). For a more historical result, the “1,000,000,000” Corpus from printed images indicates, on the hand, about five and a half million instances of shadeou in sampled texts since the year 1500 (the earliest date included in the dataset), and, on the other hand, about seven thousand instances of shadeou in the sample of English language texts (the decade of its first appearance in English). So, schlieren occurs roughly seven-hundred– fifty times less frequently than shadeou in this sampling of English usage. See corpus.byu.edu/oca and googlebooks.byu.edu.

7 The term schlieren is entered in the dictionary as a result of its frequent appearance in the (decade of its first appearance in English). So, schlieren occurs roughly seven-hundred–fifty times less frequently than shadeou in this sampling of English usage. See corpus.byu.edu/oca and googlebooks.byu.edu.
by 1969 was to be found in chemistry texts concerning the straitened and ostentatious appearance of one solution flowing through another of a different density. Other citations come from optics, aeronautics, and oceanography. Oxford English Dictionary (note 21), box 3, Art and Technology records (note 4), first page. For the next three pages the orientations of the sun are given, as is the time, date, and month.

13 The Oxford English Dictionary does not list sunshape, sunship, or lightship as either open-hyphenated, or closed compounds (sun shape, sun-shape, sunships), likewise, the Corpus of Contemporary American English does not show instances of these words naming the illuminated forms (see notes 7 and 6). While www. flickr.com returns no matches for moonshape, it does display relevant images if you search for sunshape and lightship (see note 12).

14 Robert Irwin, in Drugs and Beyond, ed. Lynne Litman, Extension Media Center, University of California at Los Angeles, 1971, at 357.


16 Art and Technology was based on a “fundamental methodology,” “to engineering out of artifice, into industry,” wrote LACMA’s senior curator Maurice Tuchman, and it allowed twenty-

threes of them to work “in residence … within leading technological and industrial corpora-

17 Except when the interviewee described the orientation of the sun, there are three square white marks of the day. Three white squares more or less to the right.


19 “(and preceding) the orientation of the room,” Irwin stated in x–y–z. The 1974 piece consists of three rectangular cutouts out of an ocean-facing window of a gallery in the advantage of Contemporay Art San Diego in La Jolla, California. “President’s Lecture: Robert Irwin on Abstraction,” Rice University, Houston, March 23, 2000, video recording.


21 as reported by Maurice Tuchman, and it allowed twenty-

3. five to twenty, three-dimensional, “one-, two-, three-, four-dimension,” totor Maurice Tuchman, and it allowed twenty-

22 For instance, in 1970, so his interview with Irwin seems to have occurred in late 1969 or early 1970 (162).


24 “(and preceding) the orientation of the room,” Irwin stated in x–y–z. The 1974 piece consists of three rectangular cutouts out of an ocean-facing window of a gallery in the advantage of Contemporay Art San Diego in La Jolla, California. “President’s Lecture: Robert Irwin on Abstraction,” Rice University, Houston, March 23, 2000, video recording.


26 “The 1973 piece consisted of three rectangular cutouts out of an ocean-facing window of a gallery in the advantage of Contemporay Art San Diego in La Jolla, California. “President’s Lecture: Robert Irwin on Abstraction,” Rice University, Houston, March 23, 2000, video recording.

27 Houston, March 2000, video recording.

28 “(and preceding) the orientation of the room,” Irwin stated in x–y–z. The 1974 piece consists of three rectangular cutouts out of an ocean-facing window of a gallery in the advantage of Contemporay Art San Diego in La Jolla, California. “President’s Lecture: Robert Irwin on Abstraction,” Rice University, Houston, March 23, 2000, video recording.


31 Houston, March 2000, video recording.


33 “The 1973 piece consisted of three rectangular cutouts out of an ocean-facing window of a gallery in the advantage of Contemporay Art San Diego in La Jolla, California. “President’s Lecture: Robert Irwin on Abstraction,” Rice University, Houston, March 23, 2000, video recording.

34 Houston, March 2000, video recording.


36 Houston, March 2000, video recording.

37 Houston, March 2000, video recording.

38 Houston, March 2000, video recording.