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INTRODUCTION

My own deep considering of personal experience is the foundation of my recent paintings about my surroundings. I have been developing these works in ever-widening geographic circles: from my native Budapest to different European locations and finally to the USA. Through these widening circles, I have cultivated an interest in the impact seemingly insignificant public spaces exercise over all of us. That is, I am interested in the *genius loci* that determines mental environment, architecture, and naturally painting. My painting has come to the vision-centric question of the unique architectural eurhythmy: in essence, both the light-described form of building-like objects and the social or public role of the environment. These questions came to the fore in my work during a period of almost five years, when I worked in a series of large and empty industrial spaces. The theory of the impact of physical and mental environment appeared in my visual art first and later in my thesis for my PhD, eventually becoming a research project around the theme. The object I proposed to myself was to recover the role of the *genius loci* that influences the artwork – or artist – and to map the object itself as a quiet master of its milieu. How to surprise these impulses during the act if both influences are active at the same time?

I am developing my dissertation, dealing with the topic described above, by interviewing carefully chosen artists, scientists, and thinkers in different fields on the topic of the spirit of the place. As my own experiences in painting were the germ of my conception of the *genius loci*, I'm also including my latest series of paintings, produced over the course of the last two years, as well some quotes from past developments.

DESCRIPTION

I am very interested in the work of the American James Turrell, who has developed a lifelong project on the theme of the spirit of the place and the ways in which the creator of this spirit can in turn be determined by nature. Bela Veszelszky, a Hungarian painter of the post-World War II era is also a source of my research.

His conception was profoundly determined by his place; he formed his visual expressions by sifting from his atmosphere. Considered together, the oeuvres of these two artists demonstrate the effect of the physical and mental environment on the creation of art, site-specific and otherwise. By comparing and investigating their “genius loci-projects,” which manifest the idea at the heart of my dissertation, I hope to arrive at a valid answer to the question posed in my thesis.

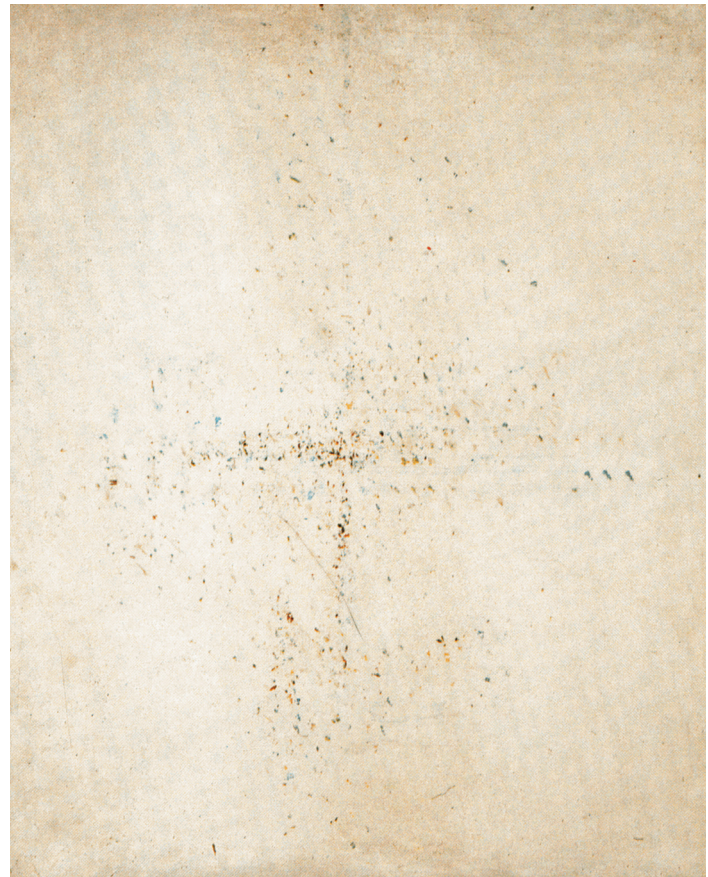
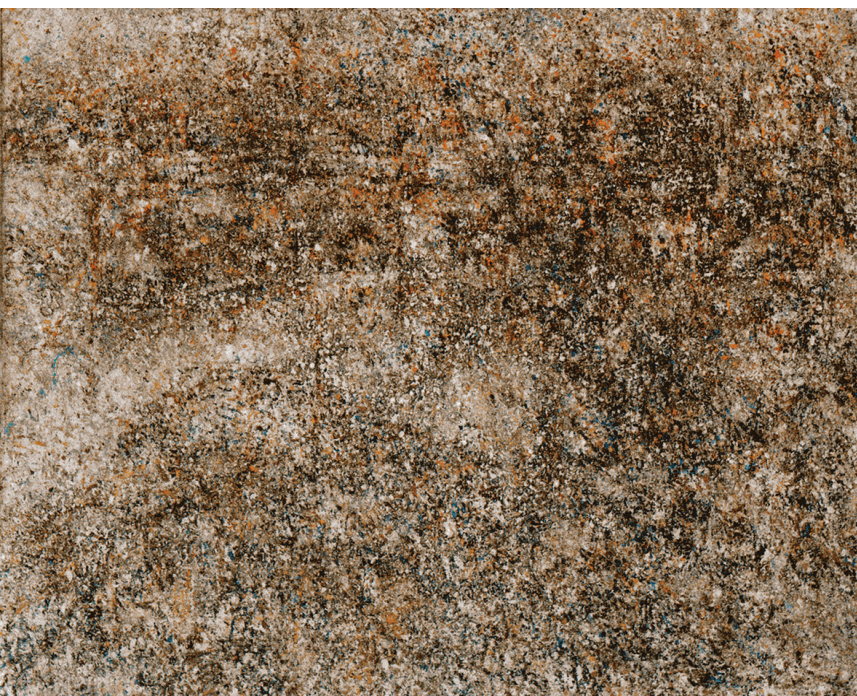
VESZELSZKY

Veszelszky was a young artist in Hungary at the beginning of the twenties, and suffered from the spiritual and intellectual vacuum of the period. In the Hungarian Soviet Republic in 1919, after the loss of the war and the following financial and spiritual crisis, faith in the *raison d'être* of art and in humanity was impaired. The sense of uselessness and aimlessness influenced art very strongly. In his early works, produced in his years at the Academy, he tried to break with the naturalistic manner of representation. His ideal was Van Gogh's painting style – the dot-painting technique was already well-known at that time. He dealt with the possibilities of the Byzantine frontal picture structure, the vertical-horizontal balance, and the icon composition. Later, he developed an intense interest in gnostic philosophy; according to them, the world is created by the Idea; the world is created by man, who is responsible for it. The world is idea first and foremost, but also tangible reality at the same time. Veszelszky confronted the abstract idea of God with the anthropomorphic image of God.

Man in space, man in time: these thoughts – though not as philosophical “*an sich*” categories – were dealt with by Veszelszky. The complex conception of three dimensional space is one of the most basic ideas of gnosticism. The human mind is able to understand three dimensional space only with the help of mathematics. Veszelszky's art was influenced by this complexity. He did not conceive of matter as something that is solid and stable, but rather as a mass of continuously vibrating particles. This thought was connected to an ambivalence toward the notion of the ideal purity of light and matter. Space as a problem, and geometry as a possibility of solution or orientation, were of great importance to Veszelszky.



The smallest element in the materialization of ideas is the point. This is the fundamental principle of gnosticism, and the determining factors in gnosticism's conception of the universe. In finding the right place for a dot on the canvas, Veszelszky was not driven by the questions of colour theory – he wanted to find a “supreme truth.” In some of his landscapes, the dots are grouped into axis or cross-forms. However, only the effort to find a system based on the laws of geometry is common to these works; their relationship is not direct.





He painted what he saw from the windows of his flats, first on Pusztaszeri St., later on Varadi St; he intended to build a small, circular panorama of these paintings. He found important vertical motifs in both places: the tower of a church and the chimney of the brick-works. When the chimney was knocked down, he stopped painting landscapes.

It is generally known that Veszelszky started to dig a pit in the garden of his house in Pusztaszeri St. in 1958. He wanted to observe the starred sky; the pit was dug so that people passing on the street or waiting for the bus could not disturb him. Although the original aim was the observation of the sky, he was caught by the beauty of the layers of the soil; thenceforward he looked more inward than upward.

After his death in the seventies, Eva Körner, one of the greatest Hungarian post-WWII art historians, who was a close friend and researcher of Veszelszky's work, protected the "Gödör"-called object (the pit) from the real estate investors and the city - finally they decided not to refill it: "this land-art piece, created 25 years ago by Veszelszky, is one of the prides of Hungarian art-history according to the genre of art invented long before the modern trend of turning nature itself into the matter of artificial creation. (land-art)"

Veszelszky's oeuvre is determined by a two-directional escape: on one hand, he escaped from the object, but did not find anything else; while on the other hand,

he escaped from intimacy into a certain geometrical accuracy. The soul that emigrated into a silent, philosophical opposition from the hopelessness and the emptiness of the Socialist ideology wanted to compensate for the lack of opportunity for self-expression with portraits, landscapes and still lifes.

A patch is always the occupation of a real place while a point or a dot is always fictitious and abstract. A mass of points results from the interrupted touch of the surface. Each dot of paint has its place on the surface, but its exact place cannot be determined if the coordinates are unknown. The edge of the canvas, with its vertical and horizontal planes, can help the orientation. However, without hierarchy and division (contours, elaborated details, continuity) the relationship of the elements is nothing but a chaotic, random co-existence. The result is the colorful, bright image of chaos: like glass pearls rolling away, or sweets, or French salad, for instance.

Veszelszky denaturalizes, and distills the given “corner” of the visible reality – a bend, for example. He eliminates the incidental details, the frustrating atmosphere of the outer world, the environment, the whole era. He turns the momentary joy into something eternal. Eliminating the spontaneity of the impression, he crystallizes the vibrating air-prospective. Lacking contrasts and contours, everything seems to float at the same distance. The differences in light result in new relation-systems. Object, body, and form unify with their environment. The depicted object itself is reduced to a single quality, colour, while losing its objective reality. The result is a universe of empty light space. Veszelszky seems to X-ray the night, giving a negative image of the starred sky. He wants to determine the coordinates in the cosmos, while in the inner space of the painting “the complete image of the World appears and vanishes continuously.”

(Teilhard de Chardin)

TURRELL

First, I am dealing with no object. Perception is the object.

Secondly, I am dealing with no image, because I want to avoid associative, symbolic thought. Thirdly, I am dealing with no focus or particular place to look.

With no object, no image and no focus, what are you looking at?

You are looking at you looking.

James Turrell

James Turrell was born in Los Angeles in 1943. His undergraduate studies at Pomona College focused on psychology and mathematics; only later, in graduate school, did he pursue art, receiving an MFA from the Claremont Graduate School in Claremont, California. Turrell's work involves explorations in light and space that speak to viewers without words, impacting the eye, body, and mind with the force of a spiritual awakening. "I want to create an atmosphere that can be consciously plumbed with seeing," says the artist, "like the wordless thought that comes from looking in a fire." Informed by his studies in perceptual psychology and optical illusions, Turrell's work allows us to see ourselves "seeing." Whether harnessing the light at sunset or transforming the glow of a television set into a fluctuating portal, Turrell's art places viewers in a realm of pure experience. Situated near the Grand Canyon and Arizona's Painted Desert is Roden Crater, an extinct volcano the artist has been transforming into a celestial observatory for the past thirty-five years. (He started in 1977.)





Working with cosmological phenomena that have interested man since the dawn of civilization and have prompted responses such as Stonehenge and the Mayan calendar, Turrell's crater brings the heavens down to earth, linking the actions of people with the movements of planets and distant galaxies. His fascination with the phenomena of light is ultimately connected to a very personal, inward search for mankind's place in the universe. Influenced by his Quaker faith, which he characterizes as having a "straightforward, strict presentation of the sublime," Turrell's art prompts greater self-awareness through a similar discipline of silent contemplation, patience, and meditation. His ethereal installations enlist the common properties of light to communicate feelings of transcendence and the divine.

At Roden Crater I was interested in taking the cultural artifice of art out into the natural surround. I did not want the work to be a mark upon nature, but I wanted the work to be enfolded in nature in such a way that light from the sun, moon and stars empowered the spaces ... I wanted an area where you had a sense of standing on the planet. I wanted an area of exposed geology like the Grand Canyon or the Painted Desert, where you could feel geologic time. Then in this stage set of geologic time, I wanted to make spaces that engaged celestial events in light so that the spaces performed a "music of the spheres" in light. The sequence of spaces, leading up to the final large space at the top of the crater, magnifies events. The work I do intensifies the experience of light by isolating it and occluding light from events not looked at. I have selected different portions of the sky and a limited number of events for each of the spaces. This is a reason for the large number of spaces.

(Air Mass, The South Bank Centre)

His vision for the project has changed somewhat over the years, as spaces were added or altered based on experience he gained in working with light, but remains consistent with the original plan for the site. When complete, the project will contain 20 spaces (some with more than one viewing space). The light within the spaces will come from many sources, and some effects will be familiar to those who have seen the artist's installations and Skyspaces over the years. The relative remoteness of Roden Crater will require a journey and a commitment of time on the part of visitors, deepening the experience of discovery.

“My work is more about your seeing than it is about my seeing, although it is a product of my seeing. I'm also interested in the sense of presence of space; that is space where you feel a presence, almost an entity – that physical feeling and power that space can give.”

Roden Crater has knowledge in it and it does something with that knowledge. Environmental events occur; a space lights up. Something happens in there, for a moment, or for a time. It is an eye, something that is itself perceiving. It is a piece that does not end. It is changed by the action of the sun, the moon, the cloud cover, by the day and the season that you're there, it has visions, qualities and a universe of possibilities.

(Occluded Front, MOCA)

A hole on a hill in Budapest and a peak of a volcano with the crater in Arizona – two artists, two dimensions in two disparate geological, sociocultural, and historical contexts – inspired by the same idea. How are these developments connected in timelessness, in the spiritual nature of the effort to express oneself? And how do these works reveal the object itself, predestined by the genius loci?