Pulling up to the Metro-North train station in Beacon, New York, I was quick to notice the incredible scenery along the Hudson River. It was a beautiful day: the trees were green and the water reflected the blue sky. As I exited the train and stepped off the platform, I saw the Dia:Beacon, a revamped former factory, hiding in the trees. Walking up to grand glass double doors, even the exterior of the museum is impressive. Previously a Nabisco box factory, the museum is abundant in wide, open spaces and prime for the exhibition I aimed to see: Robert Irwin’s *Excursus: Homage to the Square*[^1]. Juxtaposed to the busyness of New York City, the museum’s lack of color and sound is alarming. It left me pondering whether such simplicity could still be entertaining, or if I would find myself quickly becoming bored with the absence of stimuli.

*Excursus: Homage to the Square*[^1] is featured in the Dia’s first show space. Upon first impression, it appears to be a series of white walls with open doorways that create a sequence of integrated rooms which you are invited to walk through and explore. These walls, also called scrims, are made of sheer, white fabric draped over wooden beams. Skylights and windows provide natural light that floods the rooms and penetrates through the translucent walls. This light serves as a complement to the true star of *Excursus: Homage to the Square*[^1]. Irwin is known for his work with fluorescent and other artificial light. For

[^1]: Art lover Chelsea Moore pilots readers through the creative life of Robert Irwin. Written in Senior Lecturer Victoria Olsen’s Freshman Seminar, “The Rise of the Visual,” Moore asks how minimalist art can engage with a public dependent on constant stimulation. A return to simplicity is revealed as both challenging and necessary.
this exhibit, he has created multicolored fluorescent sculptures that hang perpendicularly along the doorways. In a review in the *Hudson Valley Almanac Weekly*, Lynn Woods describes these sculptures vividly:

Below and above the lit portion of the tubes, Irwin has wrapped layers of different colored theatrical gels, comprising a pattern of stripes. The colors are mostly somber—dark purples, lavenders, greens, browns and beiges—although in some instances, one or two narrow bands of color are illuminated: a bright red or yellow glowing strip that suggests signals. (Woods)

In her description, Woods captures the subtle complexity of the fluorescent lights, and reveals how Irwin gracefully yet boldly plays with light and space in this piece. The multitude of light sources, natural and artificial, reflect and bounce off the walls and throughout the rooms. Glimpses of the shadows of fellow museum-goers may be caught as one moves through the space. The white of the scrims and the minimalist quality of the exhibit as a whole convey a strong sense of sterilization, as if the walls beg to be touched even though touch is forbidden. While this play on light and space may be ominous, it would be very difficult to walk away from *Excursus: Homage to the Square* without feeling more calm and serene than you did upon entering.

Throughout his career Irwin has continuously adapted and adjusted his artistic style in order to find a balance between his ideals and the accessibility of his work. Much of Irwin’s work focuses on how the reduction of excess enhances the perception of his subject. His art challenges the shrinking attention span of the average person by forcing them to selectively attend to minimalistic pieces. The precision and specificity of *Excursus: Homage to the Square* reflects the artist’s everlasting pursuit of a perfect art form. However, this obsessive attention to detail may be easily overlooked by the average lay person, and begs the question: what does Irwin sacrifice for such perfection? Now, at the age of 87, Irwin is still looking for ways he can assert this minimalist style into a society overwhelmed by sensation.
In Peter Schjeldahl’s “Improvising in Art and Life,” Irwin’s professional career is chronicled. Schjeldahl describes his early work as having “developed from paintings of barely perceptible lines or dots in monochrome fields, through transparent plastic columns and white plastic disks cantilevered from the wall, to entire white environments inflected only by light and bits of wire or tape or scrim.” It is apparent in even his earliest work that Irwin’s main focus is how the precision of his work guides viewers’ perception. He makes artistic decisions laboriously, never overlooking how one color reacts to the next, or how one material may be more translucent than another. He obsesses over every element of his work. His lines must be perfectly straight, angles perfectly square, and colors chosen with an exactness unique to the Light and Space Movement.

However, crippled by his intense perfectionism in 1982, Irwin had yet to find true satisfaction with his paintings. He wanted to optimize the viewer experience, and believed his paintings failed to be stimulating enough to match his standards. In an interview with Jonathan Griffin from the international art magazine Apollo, Irwin recalls of his paintings: “They were really fucking bad. Just before the door opens. Woah. This is not good.” While he was able to hyperfocus on the minimal elements of his paintings, appreciation for the precision was not widespread. Viewers were unable to see the significance of his exact geometry and strategic coloring. The paintings seemed to have lost their complexity in their quest for simplicity.

When he realized that he needed to make a change, Irwin shifted to a more expressionist style. He began to experiment with various media and created pieces that featured materials such as aluminum and plastic, in addition to acrylic paint on canvas. He also began to experiment with the manipulation of shape and began creating paintings on convex canvases. This new media led Irwin to begin playing with physical shapes. In the same Apollo interview, Griffin recounts Irwin’s first experience using three dimensional space: “In his Venice studio, he rounded out the corners between the floors, the walls and the ceilings with smooth plaster, and began experimenting with different artificial light sources, trying to find the most neutral and unobtrusive means of lighting the space” (Griffin). Although he never finished or showcased this particular piece, his early experimentation...
with light and space led him to begin creating the installation pieces that have since been so widely successful.

With his new inclusion of the third dimension, Irwin began coming closer to effectively communicating his unique style to his audience. He broke himself out of the limits of color and shape to create art that balanced perfection and reality. This new style took into account his obsessiveness, yet is also “intended to be absolutely responsive to its environment, and its objective is to enhance a viewer’s perception of a space” (Griffin). Irwin’s movement toward what he called “Conditional Art” led to much more success within his art form (Griffin). Previously, his hyper-focus to detail greatly inhibited the efficacy of his paintings. Bad reviews and negative reactions, such as those discussed in chapter four of Irwin’s biography Seeing Is Forgetting the Name of the Thing One Sees by Lawrence Weschler, expose how viewers were uninterested and unimpressed by the tedious lines and shapes. With his installation pieces, however, Irwin is able to capture and manipulate human perception in a brand new way. He began to create pieces that rely less on the viewer’s ability to appreciate intricate detail in the way he does. No longer focused on how minimalism forces selective attention, he created pieces that guide perception rather than control it. His new art was intriguing, mind-bending, and explored the boundaries of human perception. He became more capable of giving a comprehensible form to his precise and minimalist style by creating art that played with the perception of light and space, two facets of reality that people are naturally in tune with.

Much of Irwin’s work can be characterized as focused on sensory affect and perception. His work was meticulous, and he greatly emphasized clean lines and stark contrasts. These unique fascinations led Irwin to collaborate with artists such as Donald Judd, Robert Morris, and Richard Serra, creating the now widely popular Light and Space movement. This movement focuses on the utilization of light and space to create interactive sculpture and installation artwork that enhances viewing experience by focusing on the phenomena of human perception. The movement began in Los Angeles, California in the 1960s, with Irwin as one of its pioneering artists. Rules and guidelines for resulting pieces were loose, yet the artists within the movement all followed Irwin in his pursuit of artistic perfection. As
Joan Boykoff and Reuben M. Baron state in their article on the Light and Space movement for *Artcritical* magazine, these artists were creating pieces that “were particularly well suited to capturing and transforming the ephemeral luminosity of the ocean and the smog-besmirched sky, as well as the high gloss brilliance of surfboards and autos that were primary everyday experiences for these artists.” They used textures such as resin and fabric in combination with architectural design and spacial manipulation in order to create an experience that activates all aspects of perception. The goal of the movement is not to create something new from nothing, rather, to enhance and emphasize the mundane or ordinary.

*Excursus: Homage to the Square*³ perfectly captures the many elements and multiple objectives of the Light and Space movement. By creating rooms into which the viewer must enter, the piece isolates the viewer and therefore forces a heightened perception of their surroundings. The white scrims create a clean backdrop upon which the subtly colored fluorescent lights are showcased and greatly emphasized. The translucent fabric used to create the white scrims is a staple of Irwin’s. He discovered the material during a trip to Amsterdam, where he found it was being used by the Dutch for translucent window shades. Irwin debuted the fabric in 1970 when he used it for a piece in the Museum of Modern Art in New York City. Nearly thirty years later, he returned to the unique fabric to create a piece for the Dia:Chelsea titled *Prologue: x18³*. Just a few months after the premiere of *Prologue: x18³*, Irwin returned to the piece to continue adjustments and ended up reconfiguring the piece entirely (Griffin). This final reconfiguration is now *Excursus: Homage to the Square*³, which has been on display since June 1st of 2015 and, because of its popularity, has been extended to May 2017.

While *Excursus: Homage to the Square*³ draws much inspiration from the fundamental elements of the Light and Space movement, it is also largely inspired by Josef Albers’ collection of paintings entitled simply *Homage to the Square*. The relationship between these two collections spans far beyond the obvious similarities in name. Albers’ *Homage to the Square* is concisely described by Shawn Roggenkamp, who writes: “The composition of this painting is simple enough—four progressively smaller squares within each other, each in a differ-
ent color, and all aligned closer to the bottom of the composition than to the top.” However, this simplicity is only superficial. Like Irwin, Albers is also challenging the viewer’s perception. The paintings suggest a complex relationship between the featured squares, posing questions like “[a]re they stacked on top of each other, like cut out pieces of construction paper? Are they sinking underneath each other, as if you are looking at a painting of a tunnel? Do some appear to push toward you and others to fall away?” (Roggenkamp). Unlike Irwin, Albers granted color a great importance in his paintings. As a student at the Bauhaus, Albers studied color theory and developed a technique of manipulating color that he uses in Homage to the Square, whereby “[his] paintings are exploring the creation of space through the use of color” (Roggenkamp). This use of color to create space dates back to the Dutch Golden Age and the Italian Renaissance; since the sixteenth century, the technique has been labeled “atmospheric perspective” (Roggenkamp).

*Homage to Square* is a great example of this technique: the contrasting colors of the different squares provide depth and give dimension to the paintings. This same effect can be seen in *Excursus: Homage to the Square*, at a smaller magnitude. The colors of the fluorescent lights shine ever-so-slightly on the white walls and give life to the sterile environment. These colors are used very minimally, however, and their limited inclusion forces the viewer to look even more closely to notice their effect. Albers uses color in his paintings dramatically, calling attention to the contrast and complement of different shades of red, blue, yellow, etc. that characterize his seemingly simple pieces. Irwin continues with this technique, yet in a much more restrained fashion. The resemblance of the two collections is not quite as obvious as their similarity in name, yet with an understanding of the color technique as its inspiration, the importance of color in *Excursus: Homage to the Square* refuses to be ignored.

When considered as a reaction to *Homage to the Square*, it becomes even more evident that Irwin’s style rebels against the common standard of minimalistic art. Albers exemplifies the approach that Irwin attempted in his early paintings and, while Albers was more successful, he also fails to incorporate the experience of reality. Albers’ paintings may encourage the viewer to take an extra moment
to look at the colors and shapes, but they do not engage the senses any further. In his three-dimensional work, Irwin takes minimalism one step further. He takes atmospheric perspective and strips it down to its most fundamental aspects by including colors barely perceptible in the fluorescent lights. By doing this, he encourages the viewer to focus more closely on the five or six colors he utilizes, and in this enhanced focus he forces the viewer to push irrelevant distractions out of mind. Then, in addition to this use of color, he incorporates light into the experience, which in turn activates all boundaries of perception and penetrates every edge of peripheral vision.

Excursus: Homage to the Square\textsuperscript{3} is an exhibit that is exemplary of its artistic inspiration. With only a couple of elements (i.e. the scrims and the fluorescent sculptures), the piece manipulates the perception of light and space by physically isolating the viewer and directing their attention to the few intended focuses, such as the play of light on the white walls or the flow of space throughout the asymmetrical rooms. The exhibition provides an interactive viewing experience and elicits a calm and serene response. As mentioned in a review by Ken Johnson for The New York Times, Excursus: Homage to the Square\textsuperscript{3} provides a stark contrast to the “sensory irritation and intellectual grandiosity” of much contemporary art. This exhibition takes a strong stance against a society in which people are overloaded by images and video clips. It battles the shrinking of society’s attention span by forcing the viewer to pause and focus on one or two elements, rather than the abundance of color and movement surrounding us in daily life. In the same review, Johnson calls the piece “ethereal and, in a good way, somehow purgatorial, as if you might find your way to a clear divine light with time and patience.” The piece goes beyond visual appeal, and creates an all-encompassing experience. It affects mood and emotion and, with its refreshing minimalism, the seemingly simple white rooms provide relief and escape from the many stressors of human life.

Although Irwin never explicitly verbalizes his opinion on the over-stimulation that is common in modern society, his artwork takes a bold stance on the issue. With his art, Irwin shines light upon the essentiality of excess stimuli by creating incredibly interesting and impactful minimalist pieces. Even though his work originated in California, there seems to be no better backdrop to his art than New
York City, famous for its busyness and sensory overload. In Olivia Laing’s hauntingly honest essay “Me, myself and I,” she grapples with living amongst the business and chaos of New York City, writing how “[she] quickly became intimate with hypervigilance. During the months [she] lived in Manhattan, it manifested as an almost painful alertness to the city, a form of over-arousal that oscillated between paranoia and desire.” Although not all New York City dwellers are able to express their innermost feelings in such eloquent language, Laing’s words capture an experience known to many. She finds that as the city overwhelms her, her feelings of loneliness persistently increase. Laing exposes a paradox known by many: the more we are surrounded, the lonelier we can be. With his artwork, Irwin provides us with a cure to this all-too-common predicament. *Excursus: Homage to the Square* reveals to the viewer how art doesn’t need flashing lights, loud noises, bright colors, and innumerable images in order to hold our attention. Instead, he guides us in our perception and teaches us that when we cut through the white noise, we can find a deeper appreciation of our surroundings. It is in this appreciation that we are able to see the beauty in simplicity and let our senses soak up the full effect of his artwork.

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**WORKS CITED**


