

# PILLOW OF AIR

A MONTHLY AMBLE THROUGH THE VISUAL WORLD

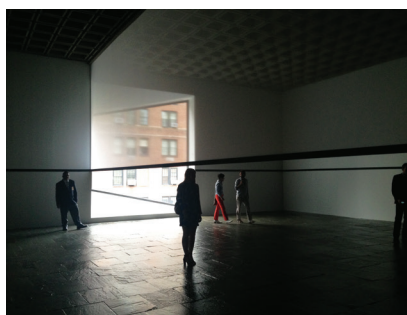
by Lawrence Weschler



IRWIN/LONGO/MORANDI/PIERO/SNYDER

A few months ago, early one midsummer evening, I happened to be up on the fourth floor of the Whitney Museum in New York, experiencing—or perhaps I should say reexperiencing—its restaging of Robert Irwin’s legendary 1977 *Scrim veil—Black rectangle—Natural light* installation, the piece in which the California artist had emptied out virtually the entire floor, stripping it down to its barest essentials (the dark slate flooring, the gray hive ceiling, that stark trapezoidal window off to the side) and then bisected the resultant vast empty space with a shimmering, pearlescent expanse of white scrim, held taut from ceiling down to eye level by a black metal bar, which in turn echoed the black painted stripe he’d applied to the perimeter of the rest of the room: that and nothing more. A piece, in short, that forced one to find one’s bearings in the midst of a free fall in one’s initial expectations (and to savor the marvel of how one is always having to adjust one’s bearings like that: falling, gauging, steadying)—and then, beyond that,

that allowed one to experience the sheer hushed marvel of natural light itself, spreading (as if in a Vermeer) like a tide across the scrim-cut room.



I say “happened to be” there, but actually I was there because a half hour hence, downstairs in the basement, I was going to be delivering a talk on Irwin, the subject of my first book, from 1982, called *Seeing Is Forgetting the Name of the Thing One Sees*, which in fact had culminated with a depiction of the original rendition of this very piece. Many of those who would soon be in the audience were likewise milling about, taking in the approaching evening tide, and presently I found myself conversing with one of them, a

compact gentleman in a leather jacket, who turned out to be the eminent ’80s-generation artist Robert Longo, famous, for example, for his startlingly realistic depictions of snazzily dressed urban men and women, eerily arrested in mid-swoon.



Longo began to tell me a story about the first time he met Irwin, back in 1977, and it was getting to be a good story, so I interrupted him and asked whether he’d be willing to share it with everyone later, down at my presentation. And he said OK.

So, about an hour later, when I got to the part in my talk where I described how across the ’60s and

into the early '70s Irwin had systematically dismantled all the usual requirements of the art act (image, line, focus, signature, object) till he got to the point where he abandoned his studio altogether and simply announced that he would go anywhere, anytime in response to any invitation to come talk with anyone about the nature of art and perception, I said, "Actually we have someone here who took him up on the offer," whereupon I invited Longo to come up and tell his story. Longo approached the podium shyly (somewhat surprisingly so in such a hip, seemingly self-assured, almost macho fellow) and launched into his tale about how in those days he'd been a graduate art student at SUNY Buffalo, experimenting in all sorts of directions, and people kept telling him how his work reminded them of the work of Bruce Nauman (whom he'd heard of) and Robert Irwin (whom he really hadn't—not surprisingly, since in those days Irwin was forbidding the photographic reproduction of his work on the grounds that such reproduction would capture everything that the work was not about, which is to say its image, and nothing that it was about, which is to say its presence, such that hardly anyone had actually seen any of the work). Anyway, Longo continued, he'd read how Irwin was going to be having this show down in the city and he wrote him to ask if he might come over to meet him and perhaps help with the installation, and Irwin wrote back, "Sure," which is how it came to pass, Longo now related, that he and his then-girlfriend, Cindy Sherman, piled into a van and headed east—but that the van stalled out a few

dozen miles outside of Buffalo and he'd had to call Irwin to explain that he wasn't going to be able to make it after all. Irwin, though, told him not to worry, that after he'd finished with the installation, he'd just come up to Buffalo himself and they could all meet after all. Which is how it came to pass, Longo went on—and suddenly his voice halted, catching everyone in the audience quite off guard, for presently he was almost sobbing at the memory—that this great artist Irwin had traveled all the way up to his remote town, and planted himself in his kitchen, and just spoke to him and his girlfriend, these two nobody graduate students (I'm paraphrasing here), for five hours straight, at which point he, Longo, asked whether he, Irwin, would mind if he asked some fellow students to come join them—and that Irwin then stayed on for two whole days, simply engaging all of them in some of the most profoundly energizing conversations they'd ever had, and how (Longo began to compose himself) it had been one of the signal events of his early life as an artist. At which point he went back and took his seat.

About two weeks later, Irwin himself (now well into his eighties) was there on the same basement stage, before an audience including many of the same folks who had been at my talk (and a whole lot of others), engaging the current show's curator, Donna De Salvo, in vivid conversation. And at one point, their dialogue turned to his own early days as an artist, affiliated with the seminal Ferus Gallery, back in LA, and how at one point there in the early

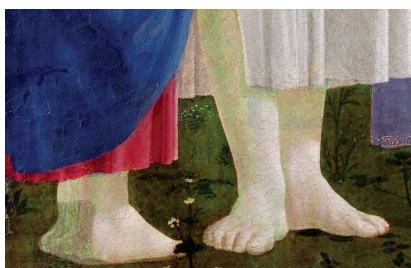
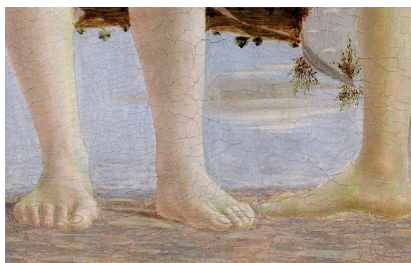
'60s the gallery artists had contrived to bring over a show by a still relatively unknown Italian artist, Giorgio Morandi (the Bolognese master who would soon become world renowned for his endless renditions of deceptively simple groupings of bottles and pitchers and jars spread across his studio table).



The thing is, Irwin went on to explain—and now suddenly *his* voice broke, likewise catching all of us in the audience by surprise, and now he, too, was almost sobbing—the guy was a true genius, and the experience of getting to spend all those days with those paintings (and they weren't just endless depictions of bottles and pitchers and jars; far from it, they were in fact all about light and structure and space and weight and lightness, deep inquiries into perception and presence,

and in fact, Irwin now insisted, the only successful abstract expressionist paintings ever created by a European), the experience of being able to spend all that time in their presence (Irwin now began to steady himself, dabbing the tears from his eyes), was one of the most thrilling and formative in his entire life.

Which in turn got *me* to recalling a moment several years back when I was visiting the magnificent Morandi retrospective at the Metropolitan for the umpteenth time that month and, striding past one of those ineffable bottle-and-pitcher-and-jar marvels, happened to come upon the eminent New York graphic designer Milton Glaser (creator of the I-heart-NY campaign and that indelible Bob Dylan cover and so many other iconic images), who now informed me that he himself, years earlier, in fact had the privilege of actually studying with Morandi back in Bologna! Well, you can imagine the stories, but one in particular came bubbling up to the surface of my memory as I sat there in the Whitney audience, how one day he, Glaser, and the old professor had been rifling through various art books, books about Piero della Francesca, to be specific, and the old professor was endeavoring to make a point, when his hand paused on a specific image (in my mind's eye, I picture student and professor alighting on *The Nativity*, or *The Baptism*, or *The Resurrection*, one of those, I can't remember if Glaser was specific about which one), whereupon the old man took a deep breath and let out a long sigh.



“Piero was so good,” he pronounced, at length, “with feet.”

Of course, the little toes lined up again and again, like so many plain bottles and pitchers and jars, are hardly just little toes at all. And, for that matter, neither are those anything-but-simple bottles and pitchers and jars—all of them, all of them, are essays in solidity and grace, gravity and light.

What exactly am I getting at here? Maybe something about Piero to Morandi to Irwin to Longo, I suppose—who knows—though, actually, I *do* know what I am coming to.

For I am coming to Gary Snyder, the great beat and nature poet up there in his Sierra Nevada fastness, a poem of his I first encountered in my own student days, when it slew me to the core (and one that always seems to bring me up short, each time I read it aloud to my students, drawing forth a barely suppressed sob of my own). It's called “Axe Handles,” and Snyder's evoking an incident one day when he was out back with his young son Kai:

One afternoon the last week in April  
Showing Kai how to throw a hatchet  
One-half turn and it sticks in a stump.  
He recalls the hatchet-head  
Without a handle, in the shop  
And go gets it, and wants it for his own.  
A broken-off axe handle behind the  
door  
Is long enough for a hatchet,  
We cut it to length and take it  
With the hatchet head  
And working hatchet, to the wood  
block.  
There I begin to shape the old handle  
With the hatchet, and the phrase  
First learned from Ezra Pound  
Rings in my ears!  
“When making an axe handle  
the pattern is not far off.”  
And I say this to Kai  
“Look: We'll shape the handle  
By checking the handle  
Of the axe we cut with-”  
And he sees. And I hear it again:  
It's in Lu Ji's Wen Fu, fourth century  
A.D. “Essay on Literature”—in the  
Preface: “In making the handle  
Of an axe  
By cutting wood with an axe  
The model is indeed near at hand.”  
My teacher Shih-hsiang Chen  
Translated that and taught it years ago  
And I see: Pound was an axe,  
Chen was an axe, I am an axe  
And my son a handle, soon  
To be shaping again, model  
And tool, craft of culture,  
How we go on.

How we go on, indeed, across the endlessly self-generating, self-replicating flow of cultural transmission. ★

Photo of Robert Irwin's Scrim veil—Black rectangle—Natural light courtesy of Jacque Donaldson. Additional credits at believeimag.com.