perception's gadfly, annoyingly prodding the taken-for-granted, relentlessly combing the ordinary and uncovering its hidden wonders. ("All I try to do for people is to reinvoke the sheer wonder that they perceive anything at all!") He disarmingly denies any special knowledge, except for his certainty that he is still searching; and by the very scandal of his obstinate perplex he upends the false certainties of others. He is a master of irony and a devotee of serious play. He has an extraordinary tolerance for ambiguity: he asks questions that seem by their very nature unanswerable, but he maintains his interest because the questions are legitimate—and are themselves probably more interesting than any answer they might summon. In short, he is an artist who one day got hooked on his own curiosity and decided to live it.

To see
is to forget
the name
of
the thing
one sees.

PAUL VALÉRY

present all around

(1985–2008)

I wonder whether art has a higher function than to make me feel, appreciate and enjoy natural objects for their art value. So, as I walk in the garden, I look at flowers and shrubs and trees and discover in them an exquisiteness of contour, a vitality of edge, or a vigor of spring as well as an infinite variety of color that no artifact I have seen in the last sixty years can rival. Each day, as I look, I wonder where my eyes were yesterday.

Bernard Berenson

CHAPTER 20

seeing is savoring

(1985)

In the months after that (in the meantime, I'd moved to New York), Irwin continued to hang around Los Angeles for a while, almost like an afterimage of his otherwise disappeared self. At one point, in May 1980, he returned to Market Street in Venice, to the very block where he'd kept a studio until 1970, the year he abandoned studio work altogether. Malinda Wyatt was opening a gallery in the building next door to his former workspace and invited him to create an installation. He cleaned out the large rectangular room, adjusted the skylights, painted the walls and ceiling an even white, and then simply sledge-hammered out the brick wall facing the street, replacing it with a sheer, semitransparent white scrim. The room seemed to change its aspects with the passing day: people came and sat on the opposite curb, watching, sometimes for hours at a time. At night cars would pull up and park perpendicular to the sidewalk, shining their brights past the taut scrim into what suddenly seemed a tightly encased luminous fogbank. The piece was up for two weeks in one of the more derelict beachfront neighborhoods of Los Angeles: no one so much as laid a hand on it (Plates 18–21).

Then, when he decided it was time to get away, he told everyone he was heading out into the desert—and, in a manner of speaking, he did just that, although the twenty-first story of one of the tallest condominium skyscrapers in Las Vegas, a glass-walled three-room apartment facing due west, was hardly what most of his friends had envisioned when he announced his intention. He left no forwarding address—only the number of a telephone-answering service in L.A., most of whose messages he never bothered to respond to. Several weeks after his disappearance, for example, the administrators of the MacArthur Foundation had a terrible time trying to track him down so they could inform him that he'd been selected to receive one of the first of their so-called genius grants ever to be awarded to a visual

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An earlier version of this text appeared as a Talk piece in the *New Yorker,* September 30, 1985.

artist—an award that in his case included a five-year stipend worth over fifty thousand dollars each year. He'd simply been too busy to return their increasingly frantic calls.

Anyway, it's a long story how I myself ultimately obtained his Las Vegas phone number ("I wanted to get away from all the noise of the art world, so I could do some reading and thinking, and this was about as far away as I could think of," being how he explained things when I finally tracked him down); but once I had it, I got into the habit, every so often, of noting the time when the sun was setting over the Hudson and then, about three hours later, giving him a call, because that meant that along with the philosophical ruminations generated by all that reading, I'd likely also get treated to a vivid running description of the onset of evening there in the desert skies beyond Las Vegas.

"Change," Irwin thus observed for me one evening. "I'm becoming convinced that it's obviously the most basic dynamic or physic of our universe. Kant talks about time and space as preexisting categories, as it were—how they must preexist any human perception—and I'd consider change in the same light. That's obvious. What's not so understandable is how much intellectual energy we waste trying to avoid this fact, contriving all these concrete systems and superstructures by which we . . ." His voiced trailed off. "Really, you should see this," he presently resumed. "There's like a haze of green floating between the pink and orange layers in the sky just above the mountain to my left. The sun dipped below the horizon about five minutes ago. The base of the mountain is purple already, and some of the canyons cutting into its face have gone jet black, but this greenish hue—it's not smog, *it's light*—just seems to be hovering, floating there above the rim of the ridge. Anyway, where Kant has been especially valuable for me is . . ." He continued in a speculative vein for a few more minutes, and then interrupted himself again: "The first stars are beginning to blink alive through the deep, deep blue of the sky just in front of me, and down below it's as if the city itself were answering: the street lights are coming on, and all those crazy neons of the hotels and the casinos along the strip are revving up. The air is so clear out here that in a little while the sky's just going to be like a metropolis of stars, and meanwhile down below there'll be this carpet, like a galaxy, of city lights all spread out across the valley, and off in the distance the black of the mountain rim will be abutting the black of the sky. Let me tell you, it can get pretty entertaining out here, pretty spectacular."

Irwin wasn't *always* there when I called. Occasionally—and as time passed it seemed to happen more frequently—he'd disappear from his hideaway for days at a time, and when he resurfaced he'd have tales about his visits to sites all over the country where he'd already proposed or was in the process of conceiving vast, often grandiose projects: that thin wall of Cor-Ten steel slicing through the park in Dallas (see Plate 23); swaths of violet-blue narrow-aperture chain-link fencing to be suspended between gleaming stainless-steel poles high up in the canopy of a eucalyptus grove in San Diego; another chain-link fencing piece, this one consisting of a hive of nine square spaces, each containing a flowering violet plum tree, for the plaza outside the Seattle municipal jail; a glass pyramid greenhouse to be thrust out into the middle of a square inlet of the Hudson River off the Battery Park development here in New York; a matrix of forty-eight translucent scrim squares to be floated out into the vast atrium of the Old Post Office in Washington, D.C.; a tantalizing "sound chasing light" piece (dozens of the strobe lights otherwise found on the wingtips of a Boeing 747 to be hung from the ceiling alongside rows of speakers programmed to give out the sound of the G and A strings plucked pizzicato on a cello, the light and speakers firing at random moments and racing about in sudden, unexpected linear sequences) for a transit terminal at Chicago's O'Hare International Airport; eleven parallel shafts of specially designed blue-white fluorescent lights coursing hundreds of yards, in and out, straight and then voluptuously loopy, between the two levels of an otherwise bleak double-decker automobile viaduct in downtown L.A.; a sequence of rooms in the Louisiana Museum in Denmark, square, taut scrim columns coursing down from skylights in the ceiling above in the first, giving way to a grid of painted white squares across the brick floor the next room over, which in turn vaulted out into a series of progressively stepped solid white columns stretching down into the next split-level room over. Of these, the only ones actually realized were those in Dallas, San Diego (Plate 28), Seattle (Plate 29), Washington, D.C., and Denmark (Plate 32), but as a group, once again, they were all about as far as could be imagined from that rectangle of string stretched across a patch of ground at the 1976 Venice Biennale.

"Oh, they're not all that different," Irwin assured me the other day when I raised the point. He happened to be back in New York, having just installed a handsome exhibition at the Pace Gallery—a retrospective survey of those and several of his other "site-conditioned" proposals. The show included blueprints, maps, models, and also photographs of the relatively few sites where Irwin's proposals have actually been realized (where the before-and-after imagery at times recalls those dichotomous advertisements for cosmetic surgery or miracle diets). Irwin is fifty-seven now, but he looks younger than that—or, rather, ageless—his bright, usually smiling face ever more dominated by that broad, high forehead. "The ambition remains the same; only the scale has changed," he continued. "The gesture is still minimal—only, now it's *spread out.* Any given square foot of any of these pieces is every bit as minimal as anything I was doing before."

Irwin's show at Pace also featured two installation pieces specifically designed for the gallery's recently refurbished space, on the second floor at 32 East Fifty-seventh Street. As visitors emerged from the elevator, they entered a simple, although visually complex, cagelike structure fashioned out of orange narrow-aperture chain-link fencing; on the floor immediately before them Irwin had placed an incongruous square patch of purple-blooming lobelia. To the visitors' left as they passed from the orange cage into the wider gallery space stretched a ravishingly luminous "soft wall"—a pearlescent double scrim stretched taut, floor to ceiling, wall to wall, in front of the gallery's wide picture windows. The expanse of sheer white fabric seemed to catch, hold, and then only gradually surrender the light streaming in from outside—light that changed its aspect by the hour. Over to the far side of this "soft wall" Irwin had carved a small square "window"—a hole in the scrim, beyond which he'd left one of the gallery's windows wide open, so that the racket and bustle of city noises and the swell of autumn breezes continuously wafted into the exhibition.

"And you know what's amazing?" Irwin asked me. We were sitting in a back room of the gallery, late in the afternoon of the first day the show was open to the public. "Once again, a good half of the people who come in don't see the cage, they don't even see the scrim—they walk right past them to get to the maps and the models and the photos. I'm not saying that they don't like them, or that they

choose to hurry past them on their way to something they think will be more interesting. You can tell by watching their body posture: they literally *don't see them!* Talk about sensory deprivation! No wonder there are so many sensory junkies in this town, no wonder people take drugs. Most people in this city—and it's true of most cities—are simply oblivious to the incredibly rich spectacle of the everyday world; they're missing out on this visual Disneyland happening all around them all the time. All that drugs do—they don't heighten or brighten one's sense of perception—all they do is momentarily override all the habitual inhibitions to clear seeing which we manage to place in our way most of the rest of the time."

I asked him why he thought people ordinarily had so much trouble seeing.

"Look," Irwin said. "The first function of perception, biologically speaking, is probably to keep us from getting hit by, say, this oncoming truck, right? Any time a visual enigma presents itself, you try to dispose of it immediately, so that you can keep dealing with all the more practical sorts of life traffic. You've got places to go, intentions to carry out. You don't really attend to what's immediately before you, you don't stop and invest time in it, because you've got *things to do.* 'I've got more important things to do' is what people say, and *seeing isn't doing.* So people walk into a situation like the one out there in the gallery, and either they don't see it at all or they immediately categorize it—'Oh,' they say, 'hi-tech,' or 'Oh, architecture'—and they move right on by. *And this is a select audience:* these are only the sort of people who'd bother to go out of their way to visit an art gallery. With pictures, with paintings inside frames, maybe, they'd be prepared to invest that suspended aesthetic attention. But paintings are like what you can barely make out through a keyhole compared with the richness of perception that's just waiting there in the world to be experienced all the time."

After a pause, Irwin continued, "It's strange. With food, for instance, people seem able to understand what's involved: you savor the taste rather than just feed the body. But people have a hard time understanding that it should be the same way with visual experience."