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Seeing Is Forgetting The Name Of The Thing One Sees: Expanded Edition



Synopsis

When this book first appeared in 1982, it introduced readers to Robert Irwin, the Los Angeles artist "who one day got hooked on his own curiosity and decided to live it." Now expanded to include six additional chapters and twenty-four pages of color plates, *Seeing Is Forgetting the Name of the Thing One Sees* chronicles three decades of conversation between Lawrence Weschler and light and space master Irwin. It surveys many of Irwin's site-conditioned projects—in particular the Central Gardens at the Getty Museum (the subject of an epic battle with the site's principal architect, Richard Meier) and the design that transformed an abandoned Hudson Valley factory into Dia's new Beacon campus—enhancing what many had already considered the best book ever on an artist.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

I've read a ton of books of art history and theory, and this one stands out as one of the best. Through thirty years of friendship and discussions, Weschler traces Bob Irwin's career, from buffing car dashboards in high school to creating monumental gardens and installations in his old age. The benefit of this extended coverage is that we get to see how Irwin develops in every stage of his career, often as these developments are happening. We discover how relationships, environment, the art world, and philosophy influence Irwin's evolution and how each element manifests itself in his work. Irwin typically deals with abstract, minimalist, and formalist art which is often considered "difficult", even by open minded art viewers. In these interviews, he extensively

details his mental and physical process, offering an unparalleled look at just what goes into these works. He recounts staring at a canvas for weeks, trying to decide precisely where a line should go and what impact it will have on the finished work. Even if you don't find yourself mesmerized by the next Agnes Martin you come across after reading this book, you'll at least gain an appreciation of why some people find it interesting and what might have been going through the mind of the artist when he/she created it. Part of what this makes this biography so compelling is that Irwin is an incredibly appealing character. Most successful artists are pigeonholed as shameless self-promoters or tortured geniuses. Irwin comes across as humble, brilliant, open minded, sincere, and indefatigably dedicated to his work. He seems like an art world version of Richard Feynman; the kind of curious guy you'd love to explore ideas with over a beer. He can talk about betting the ponies and Wittgenstein.

First off, Weschler is amazing. This book is excellent. This is rather a review of Irwin's aesthetic itself. Robert Irwin (*Seeing is Forgetting*) considers art to refer, not to an object or series of objects created by an artist for aesthetic pleasure, but rather to the experience that such objects may provoke. Art names a "Frame of Mind" in which the viewer (or, presumably listener, as well) becomes "conscious of their consciousness" (131). "Art" names precisely the experience in which one is enabled to perceive their own perceiving. To become aware of oneself as a subject with an incredible capacity for perception. Indeed, Irwin deems this human potential "the single most beautiful thing in the world" (227). This explains why it is that Irwin's works of art assume the minimalist, reductionist form that they do. It is a means for him to strip down art to its most essential element, which is perception. Irwin understands "perception as the essential subject of art" (188). A work of art is not intended to awaken viewers to a new idea or concept, in this way gesturing toward something other than itself, but rather, it is to awaken an awareness of one's own capacity to perceive. Of course, there is a certain difficulty in speaking of "works of art" in regards to Irwin's projects because for him, the viewing subject itself is the work of art. So then, in fact, anything could lend itself to art, for art "exist[s] not in objects but in a way of seeing" (190). All of Irwin's later projects are governed by the intent to facilitate the experience that constitutes art. He seeks to eliminate anything within his works that could become the object of a "literate reading" "a reading that grasps for some meaning external to or other than the sheer experience of perception.

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