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# DOUG WHEELER

24 MAY - 11 NOVEMBER 2012

49 NORD 6 EST - FRAC LORRAINE, METZ



1-

ACCESS: 49 NORD 6 EST - Frac Lorraine  
1bis rue des Trinitaires, Metz

Free Admission  
TUE - FRI: 2-7 PM  
& SAT - SUN: 11 AM-7 PM

- Free Guided Tours: Every weekend at  
5 PM (in French). Tours are available  
in English, Italian, and German upon  
request.

Special thanks to David Zwirner, New York (US)

1- Doug Wheeler, 49 Nord 6 Est 68 Ven 12 FL,  
2011-12. Exhibition view at the Frac.  
49 Nord 6 Est - Frac Lorraine Production  
Photo: Rémi Villaggi @ Doug Wheeler, Courtesy of  
David Zwirner Gallery, New York

Experience light and indefinite space! Doug Wheeler, a pioneer of the California Light and Space movement<sup>1</sup>, proposes three new site-specific spaces of perception, three luminous installations. Since the 1960s, the famous American artist has been unhinging our senses and guiding us to inhabit moments of liminality, instants of suspension in pure light. His spaces appeal not only to the retina but also to the body as a whole, and thus invite us to an approach both initiatory and meditative.

For his first solo exhibition in Europe since 1975, the Californian artist has created two new phosphorescent pieces, in addition to conceiving a new perceptual environment in his famed series of "light walls". His immersive environments subtly absorb the viewer and provoke a unique experience, which does not engage reason but is addressed directly to the body, through all the senses.

A poet of light, Doug Wheeler creates atmospheres of a rare sensuality. He challenges our perception of depth and volume, even while our bodies, clothed in light, dissolve in the white space that has grown infinite. It is a question then of exploring the very substance of light and of provoking unprecedented sensorial perceptions.

The artist belongs to the Anglo-Saxon tradition of "art as experience"<sup>2</sup>, which consists in enlisting the visitor as an agent in the work through the performative experience. One comprehends the work by means of action; confronted with the unknown, the body sets in motion attitudes forgotten or abandoned by the collective memory. Doug Wheeler's works incite a democratic desire for "knowledge through the body" which cannot be transmitted through words and which would have to do with or reexamine the aspect of ritual. A rite of passage toward enchantment!

1- The "Light and Space" movement was created in the mid-1960s on the West Coast of the United States.

2- John Dewey (1859-1952) is one of the pillars of "pragmatism". "Art as Experience" tackles moral and esthetic questions in the spirit of experimentation, which liberates the individual from the intimidating myths that hinder artistic experience.

The Frac receives funding from the Conseil Régional de Lorraine  
and the Ministère de la Culture et de la Communication -  
Direction régionale des affaires culturelles de Lorraine.

PARISart

*"I never worried so much about permanence because I make things that you experience, and then it's in your mind. Most of my stuff is site specific or site-related, but I feel that's what we do in life. We have first-hand experiences, and those are the ones we don't forget. They stay with us and hopefully they're meaningful enough that they're with you the rest of your life. That's pretty much what I've always been after. I've always tried to do works that have an effect on you that you never forget the first time." Doug Wheeler<sup>1</sup>*

Doug Wheeler grew up in the Arizona desert. The day-to-day relation with the open sky and the infinite solitude has left an imprint on the man and his works: "There are places you can go where you almost feel like you are the only living thing, and you become conscious of yourself in ways normally you're not."<sup>2</sup>

To recreate these ambivalent feelings in the exhibition space is one of the challenges taken up by the artist. This explains the precision of his sketches, the technical perfection demanded by their physical realization, the utilization of often very complex technological elements, and the in-situ character of his works. All these elements define the context within which the work appears and they help to neutralize the existing architecture in order to prevent any visual interference.

What there is to see and to "touch" is a symphony of multiple nuances and intensities of shades of white. For, simply put, the artist makes us experience the materiality of light; it's an experience of the "nothing" that surrounds us and that the artist renders palpable and seeks to share with us.

"[His] medium is not light or new materials or technology, but perception,"<sup>3</sup> John Coplans wrote already in 1968. Hence the label of phenomenological work given precisely to these immersive installations. For in order to allow us to experience the limits of our senses, Doug Wheeler sets up his works in such a way that the place where they are installed and the visitor who experiences them contribute in equal measure to their effect and meaning.

The artist searches for the exact moment at which interaction with the work takes place: physically, through our presence which activates the space we occupy; mentally, through the way we analyze and hence make real that which in fact is an illusory construction. That moment when we come to understand that our senses cannot be trusted, when we agree to lose control.

By letting us see white on white, by letting us touch what lacks any consistence, he reaches that sphere where the data transmitted by the eye and their analysis by the brain more or less fit together and where our conscious and unconscious visions supply us hard-to-reconcile data.

The brain is supposed to give a logical explanation for this: so it "scripts the real"<sup>4</sup> in order to find itself again in a familiar and delimited territory.

But in this virtual reality... real virtuosity, the disorientation remains.

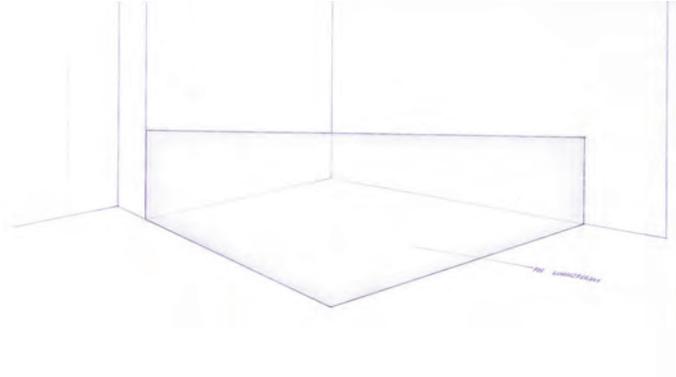
1 - from: "Talking with Doug Wheeler III", a series of conversations conducted by Tyler Green in 2008 for his blog *Modern Art Notes* on [artinfo.com](http://artinfo.com). (Articles available at [www.fracloorraine.org](http://www.fracloorraine.org)).

2 - Doug Wheeler in an interview with Jori Finkel for *Los Angeles Times* Sept. 18, 2011.

3 - John Coplans is the curator of Doug Wheeler's first solo exhibition at the Pasadena museum.

4 - Lionel Naccache, *Le Nouvel Inconscient. Freud, Christophe Colomb des neurosciences* [The New Unconscious. Freud, the Christopher Columbus of Neuroscience]. Paris: Odile Jacob, 2006.

Eléonore Jacquiau Chamska

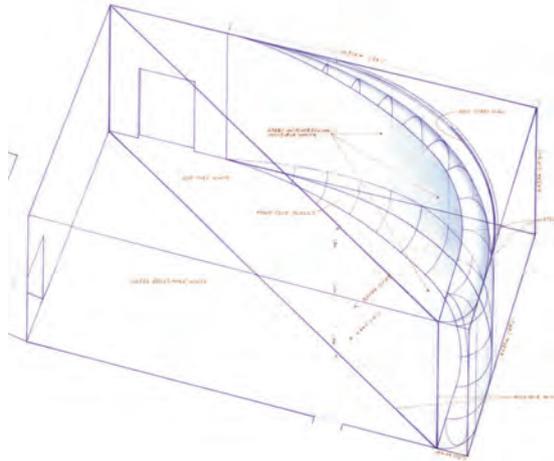


### ***49 Nord 6 Est POV Luminiferous Light Volume, 2011-12***

- Phosphorescent paint applied to existing architecture; metal halide projectors

- Created by the artist in his workshop in Venice, CA, in 1968-69, this work is being for the first time displayed in public.

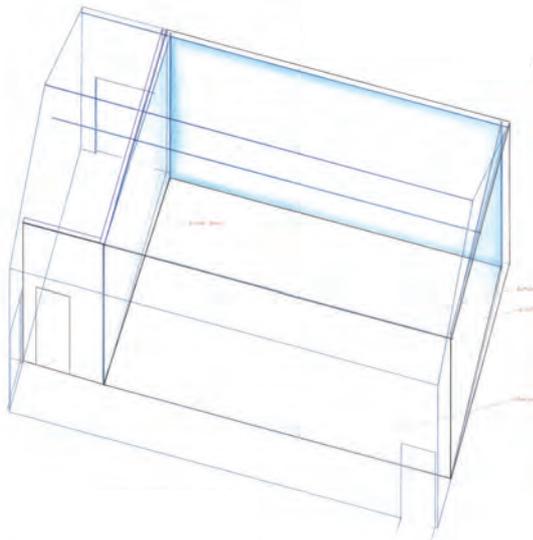
Depending on the position of the viewer, this phosphorescent piece appears as a surface or a volume, or both at once.



### ***49 Nord 6 Est Luminous Plane, 2012***

- Fiberglass and steel forms; acrylic, epoxy and phosphorescent paint; metal halide projectors

- This immersive environment transforms and appropriates the totality of the FRAC room for which it was created. An infinite space opens up beyond the luminous frame...



### ***49 Nord 6 Est 68 Ven 12 FL, 2011-12***

- Acrylic and epoxy paint; nylon scrim; white uv and Grolux neon tubing, electronic dimming system

- This work is a *Light Environment* designed specifically for the 2nd-floor exhibition room at the FRAC. It is based on a principle invented and implemented by the artist in his workshop in Venice, CA in 1968.



## The artist's career

Born in 1939 in Globe, Arizona

Lives and Works in Santa Fe, New Mexico, and Santa Monica, California (US)

### SELECTED COLLECTIONS:

- The Panza Collection, Milan
- The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York
- The San Diego Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego
- Glenstone
- The Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington D.C.
- The Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam
- The Ludwig Museum, Cologne
- The San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco
- The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles
- The Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles

In the early 1960s, Doug Wheeler gradually abandoned painting on canvas to create "paintings" made entirely of Plexiglass and neon light (*Fabricated Light Paintings*). These gave way to his well-known *Light Encasements* - a series of twenty large paintings made from vacuum-formed plastic and neon. These works were installed in all white rooms with all angles covered so that the paintings appeared to dematerialize.

Pursuing his experimentation with light, he simultaneously diverged from the object in favor of the architectural dimension of space and light. In 1969, he realised his first environmental installation outside of his studio: a "light wall" at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam, and then at the Stedelijk Museum in Eindhoven.

In 1975, he realised an environment in which for the first time he used dimmers to simulate the cyclical succession of light from dawn to dusk. This marked the first of a type of work known as an *Infinity Environment*.

Residing in Los Angeles, he is considered, along with Robert Irwin and James Turrell, as one of the pioneers of the California "Light and Space" movement, and his works have been featured in numerous exhibitions in the US and in Europe.

In the 2000s, several light environments and some of the light encasements from several American museum collections (The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York; The Los Angeles County Museum of Art; The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles; The Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington) were reinstalled as part of collective exhibitions that have had a great impact on the public and on critics alike.

In 2011, Wheeler made a spectacular re-emergence on the international art scene with his remarkable contributions to the collective exhibition *Phenomenal: California Light, Space, Surface* at the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego (which was mounted in the context of the *Pacific Standard Time* initiative) and with his first solo exhibition in New York at the David Zwirner Gallery (January 2012).

1- *Untitled*, 1966

## One-Man Exhibitions and Installations (selection)

1968 / Pasadena Art Museum (CA, US)

WORK: *Untitled*, 1966 <sup>(1)</sup>

Sprayed lacquer on Plexiglas with neon tubing. 213.4 x 243.8 cm (7' x 8')

« This fabricated light piece was part of a series in which I abandoned canvas and began working with plastic and light. These works are installed with white floor and when illuminated appear to dematerialize.» DW

1970 / Ace Gallery, Venice, Los Angeles (CA, US)  
Galerie Schmela, Düsseldorf (DE)

1975 / Salvatore Ala Gallery, Milan (IT)

WORK: *SA MI SM*, 1975 <sup>(2)</sup>

Note: This work is the first Infinity Environment

Plywood, coved plaster walls, halogens, black uv fluorescent light, mechanical dimming system.

2-room space: 609.6 x 304.8 x 365.7 cm; 914.4 x 914.4 x 487.7 cm (20' x 10' x 12'; 30' x 30' x 16')

2- *SA MI SM*, 1975

« This environment at the Salvatore Ala Gallery in Milan was the first time I worked with the concept of artificial dimming of the light in the space. I created on a continuous 16 minute loop the entire fluctuation of light from noon to night. I later discovered that the incremental changes in the light, at 1/16th of a second, mimicked the average timing of the human heart beat. The viewer experienced but did not see the changes in the light.» DW

1981 / Installation. Centro internazionale di sperimentazioni artistiche, Marie-Louise Jeanneret, Boissano (IT)

WORK: *MLJ81*, 1981 <sup>(3)</sup>

Black fabric tape applied to existing architecture, natural light  
548.6 x 548.6 x 335.3 cm (18' x 18' x 11')

3- *MLJ81*, 1981

« This work came about because of an intrusive weight-bearing post in my studio in Italy. One day I walked in and saw that a line on a two-dimensional plane on the post and the wall behind it could activate the space between them. This would only work from a single vantage point—when you moved, the effect evaporated. This very simple work is an example of an ongoing artistic concern of mine: to create a kind of tension between three-dimensional and two-dimensional perception.» DW



1- RM669, 1969

1984 / Installation. The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles (CA, US)

WORK: RM669, 1969 <sup>(1)</sup>

Note : This work belongs to the Light Encasements series  
Sprayed lacquer on vacuum-formed acrylic with white uv neon  
243.8 x 243.8 cm (8' x 8')

« This light encasement was the final work of a series of 20. Using subtle variations in coloration and different kinds of neon light, I created these works from large sheets of vacuum-formed plastic with the neon imbedded inside the frame. These works were installed in the center of a wall in an entirely white room where all the angles were coved and where ambient light was controlled. When the piece was turned on, it dematerialized and appeared to be a suspended color field of light.» DW



2- UD RU Ice Light Environment 2, 2008

2008 / Exhibition design & installation. "Upside Down : Les Arctiques", Musée du Quai Branly, Paris (FR)

WORK: UD RU Ice Light Environment 2, 2008 <sup>(2)</sup>

Steel, coved plaster walls, acrylic paint, ice floor, white uv and GroLux neon tubing. 1219 cm diameter x 396.2 cm high (40' diameter x 13' high)

« Anthropologist and curator Edmund Carpenter asked me to create an installation for an exhibition of Arctic figures and masks at the musée du quai Branly in Paris because he once saw a light environment of mine that reminded him of a phenomenological experience he had in the Siberian Arctic. Visitors to the exhibition entered through an ice light environment, where the demarcation between earth and sky on the horizon was obliterated, external sound was dampened and the physical chill from the ice floor created a sense of spatial disorientation that intentionally evoked the perceptual reality of the Arctic.» DW



3- SA MI 75 DZ NY 12, 1975/2012

2012 / David Zwirner Gallery, New York (NY, US)

WORK: SA MI 75 DZ NY 12, 2012 <sup>(3)</sup>

For his first solo exhibition in New York, Doug Wheeler created the fourth of his Infinity Environments (the first one was in Milan in 1975; then Los Angeles, 1983; and Bilbao, 2000). Within the gallery space, which was transformed into an immense, perfectly white coved room, visitors are immersed in a 32-minute light cycle that simulates dawn, day, and dusk in a continual succession. As the viewer approaches the work, he experiences the perception of a wall of light, through which he proceeds into a space that seems to be an infinite void.



1- Amsterdam Stedelijk Museum  
Installation (*Environmental Light*),  
1969

## Group Exhibitions and Installations (selection)

1965 / Rolf Nelson Gallery, Los Angeles (CA, US)

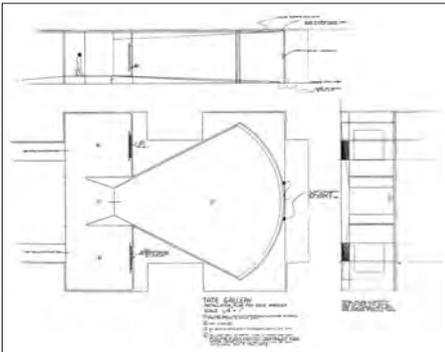
1969 / "Prospect '69", Kunsthalle, Düsseldorf (DE)

1969 / "Robert Irwin/Doug Wheeler, New Works", Fort Worth  
Community Art Center Museum, Fort Worth, Texas (US)

1969 / "Kompas IV, West Coast U.S.A.", Stedelijk Museum,  
Amsterdam ; Stedelijk van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven (NL)  
WORK: *Amsterdam Stedelijk Museum Installation (Environmental  
Light)*, 1969 <sup>(1)</sup>

Note: This installation was one of the earliest of the works referred to as « light walls ». This installation was acquired by the Panza Collection and is now in the permanent collection of the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden (Washington) where it was recreated in 2008. Steel, coved plaster walls, acrylic paint, nylon scrim, linoleum, day-light neon tubing. 975.4 x 975.4 x 487.7 cm (32' x 32' x 16')

« This was my first environmental installation realized outside my studio. I used a single kind of neon light embedded around the viewing aperture in an entirely coved room, so that in effect the room itself became a painting. I also found nylon scrim material in Europe that I stretched to create a luminous "ceiling" that captured and reflected light and appeared to float above the room. In this and all future environments, the walls, ceilings and floors were all white.» DW



2- Tate Gallery Installation, 1970

1970 / "Larry Bell, Robert Irwin, Doug Wheeler", The Tate  
Gallery, Londres (GB)

WORK: *Tate Gallery Installation*, 1970 <sup>(2)</sup>

Note: This work was acquired by the Panza Collection and is now in the permanent collection of the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York. Steel, coved plaster walls, acrylic paint, nylon scrim, neon, carpet. 2141.1 x 1607.8 x 487.7 cm (843'' x 633'' x 192'')

« The installation at the Tate was a significant work forme because it incorporated physical elements in addition to light. At the entrance, I employed the Venturi principle, which narrowed the viewer's field of vision and caused him to instinctively speed up. Upon entering, the viewer was almost pulled forward toward the curving wall of light, which was seen in complete peripheral vision. Because the floor was sloped, the viewer was then arrested, uncertain about moving forward into a wall of indefinite light, almost afraid of falling off a cliff. Sound was dampened and spread along the edges.» DW

1- *PS176 Installation*, 1976

1976 / "Ambiente Arte, arte dal futurismo alla body art", 37ème Biennale de Venise, Pavillon américain (IT)

1976 / "Painting and Sculpture in California: the Modern Era", San Francisco Museum of Art; National Collection of Fine Arts, Washington (D.C., US)

1976 / "Rooms PS 1", The Institute for Art and Urban Resources, PS1, Long Island City (NE, US)

WORK: *PS176 Installation*, 1976 (1)

Gradational glass, acrylic paint applied to existing architecture, natural light. 609.6 x 304.8 x 365.8 cm (20' x 10' x 12')

« In the PS1 project, artists in the exhibition were each given \$100 and a space in this former school building to create a work. I painted my room a medium gray to minimize detail and create focus on the six large windows that looked out on the NY skyline. I removed the glass from one (no barrier), installed new glass on the next (slight barrier), and applied gradational film in increasing percentages to the remaining windows until your own reflection was all that you could see. An idea about how we are taught to "see".» DW

1983 / "The First Show: Painting and Sculpture from Eight Collections 1940-1980", MOCA, Los Angeles (CA, US)

1986 / "Individuals: A Selected History of Contemporary Art, 1945-86", MOCA, Los Angeles (CA, US)

1997-98 / "Sunshine and Noir: Art in LA 1960-1997", Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, Humlebaek (DK) ; Kunstmuseum, Wolfsburg (DE) ; Castello di Rivoli, Turin (IT) ; UCLA at The Armand Hammer Museum, Los Angeles (CA, US)

2- *GB TC LA SA MI SM Installation/ Guggenheim Bilbao/Panza*, 1975/2000

2000 / "Changing Perceptions: The Panza Collection at the Guggenheim Museum", Guggenheim Museum Bilbao (ES)

WORK: *GB TC LA SA MI SM Installation /Guggenheim Bilbao/Panza*, 1975/2000 (2)

Steel, coved plaster walls, acrylic paint, halogens, Grolux and black uv neon tubing, electronic dimming system.

2-room space: 975.4 x 670.6 x 396.2 cm (32' x 22' x 13') ;  
2133.6 cm diameter x 609.6 cm high (70' diameter x 20' high)

« Because of the size of the space and the sophistication of the electronics now available, I was able to realize the work as originally intended in 1975. In this work, the viewer approaches through a grey entry room, and is drawn toward what appears to be a wall of light. As the viewer steps into the space, he experiences the sensation of being in an infinite void. The light changes imperceptibly, going from the whitest hot light of noon to the deepest violet of dusk.» DW



1- Ace Gallery Installation  
(Environmental Light, January)

2004 / "Singular Forms (Sometimes Repeated): Art from 1951 to the Present", The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York (NY, US)  
WORK : Ace Gallery Installation (Environmental Light, January), 1970/2004 (1)

Note: This work was acquired by the Panza Collection and is now in the permanent collection of the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York. This work is a recreation of the environment realized at the ACE gallery in Los Angeles in 1970.

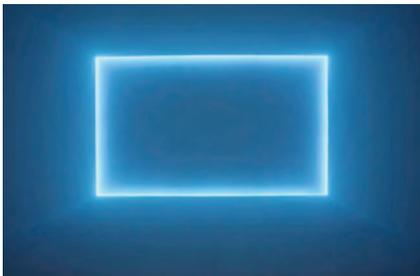
Nylon scrim, linoleum, acrylic paint, steel housings with Grolox and white uv neon tubing applied to existing architecture.

Inner Room : 457,2 x 894 x 894 cm (180'' x 352'' x 352'')

Outer Room : 911,9 x 911,9 x 496,6 cm (359'' x 359'' x 195,5'')

« When I realized this environment in 1970, I employed what I learned from a work recently completed at the Stedelijk and from experiments in my studio. I combined two different types of light to create and activate a dimension between the light source and the wall it was projected on. This was the first time that I used the combination of lights in two parallel rows. I also stretched nylon scrim to create a luminous ceiling that appeared to float in the space.» DW

2004 / "Beyond Geometry: Experiments in Form, 1940s-70s", The Los Angeles County Museum of Art (CA, US)



2- Eindhoven Stedelijk Van Abbemuseum Installation (Environmental Light), September 1969/2008

2008 / "The Panza Collection," The Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington (D.C., US)

WORK: Eindhoven Stedelijk Van Abbemuseum Installation (Environmental Light), September 1969/2008 (2)

Note: This work is a recreation of the environment realized for the Stedelijk Museum Eindhoven (1969).

Steel, plaster walls, acrylic paint, white uv neon tubing.  
731.5 x 609.6 x 365.8 cm (24' x 20' x 12')

« One of my earliest and most minimal realized environments, this work originated in a travelling exhibition called *Kompas IV* (1969-70). I made two site specific installations for the two different venues for the exhibition. In this recent version at the Hirshhorn Museum, I used white uv neon light, which creates an impression of diffuse foginess and adds to the experience of indefinite space.» DW

2008-09 / "Time & Place: Los Angeles 1957-1968," Moderna Museet, Stockholm (SW) ; exhibition travelled to Kunsthaus Zurich (CH) as "Hot Spots: Rio de Janeiro/Milano/Los Angeles 1956-1969"

2009 / "Collection: MOCA's First Thirty Years", MOCA, Los Angeles (CA, US)

2011 / "Phenomenal: California Light, Space, Surface", The Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego (CA, US)

ŒUVRE : DW 68 VEN MCASD 11, 1968/2011

This work is the most recent of the type of light installations referred as the "light walls". It was commissioned by the Museum of Contemporary Art of San Diego and will remain on view through August 2012.

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January 15, 2012

## Into the Heart of Lightness

By RANDY KENNEDY

THE artist Doug Wheeler tells two stories, both having to do with light, that go a long way toward explaining why he is so revered by many fellow artists — as a visionary and a relentlessly stubborn perfectionist — and also why his work has been seen by so few American artgoers over the last few decades, particularly those in New York.

The first story takes place at the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, Spain, where several years ago Mr. Wheeler created a complex installation he calls an “infinity environment,” featuring a light-saturated, all-white, rounded room with no corners or sharp angles, rendering viewers unable to fix their eyes on any surface. It invokes an experience of light itself as an almost tactile presence. As Mr. Wheeler continued to tweak the piece, a small boy walked up to the room and hesitated before entering, putting his hands in front of him because his senses told him that the square entrance was a wall, not simply a wall of light flooding his vision.

“I thought, ‘O.K., I can stop worrying so much and being mad about them letting people in too early,’” Mr. Wheeler said recently over coffee at the David Zwirner gallery in Chelsea, where he has just opened his first solo New York gallery show at the age of 72, remaking a cavernous interior into a kind of immaculate white vacuum tube — the city’s first infinity environment.

The second story he tells happened in the late 1960s, in a former dime store in Venice, Calif., the studio where he first began creating the ethereal, experiential work that made him a founder of the so-called Light and Space movement, along with fellow West Coast artists like Robert Irwin, James Turrell and Mary Corse. One afternoon Mr. Wheeler welcomed a couple of prominent dealers from a New York gallery — “who shall remain nameless,” he now says tersely — to show off a new work using phosphorus paint and lights to create the sensation of a mistlike plane bisecting part of the studio.



Doug Gates/Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego

Doug Wheeler's installation "DW 68 VEN MCASD 11" (1968-2011), in San Diego.

The dealers walked right past the piece without noticing it, making a beeline to some earlier, popular light works that hung on the walls like paintings.

“I just thought what idiots they were for not seeing it,” he said. “Now maybe it wasn’t powerful enough. Maybe it was just my arrogance. But at that time I didn’t think of it that way.”

“What they expected to see, they saw,” he added, “and then they left.”

He bid them a friendly goodbye and never did business with the gallery again.

His career has been punctuated by such decorous but epic refusals. He has said no to major museum exhibitions, because of his doubts that the works would be shown in the way they were intended. In a career of more than four decades he has never had a full-time American gallery represent him except for a brief, troubled turn with the Los Angeles dealer Doug Christmas. He even once turned down Leo Castelli, at the time the most powerful dealer in the country, because he felt that Castelli wanted to push him to crank out versions of older works, from which “I’d already learned everything I wanted to learn.” (“I heard he told people he thought I was crazy,” Mr. Wheeler said.)

The effect of this deeply principled approach has been that his work has been seen mostly on the West Coast and in Europe, where the Milanese collector Giuseppe Panza di Biumo, who died in 2010, and his wife, Giovanna, were enthusiastic supporters. Through the Panza collection, Wheeler pieces are now in the collections of the Guggenheim Museum in New York and the Hirshhorn in Washington. But sightings of the work on the East Coast have been few and far between, partly because of the complexity of their installation.

For several years in the mid-1970s Mr. Wheeler grew so frustrated with the art world that he took up screenwriting to support himself, so he could keep making his art his way. (The one result that made it to the screen was a 1978 television trucker movie, “Steel Cowboy,” with James Brolin and Rip Torn, of which Mr. Wheeler says, gratefully, “There was nothing of my work left in it at all.”)

By the ’80s he had left Los Angeles for Santa Fe, N.M., where he still works. When David Zwirner — whose gallery has dug deeply in recent years into the works of Minimalist and ’60s and ’70s West Coast artists — included a Wheeler piece in a show several years ago, Mr. Zwirner said, he considered Mr. Wheeler a “kind of mythical figure.”

“And then we get an e-mail from Doug Wheeler — he exists! — and he was telling us we’d shown the

work the wrong way, that it was not just a wall piece," he recalled. "We'd screwed it up." But despite the infelicitous introduction he began to pursue Mr. Wheeler and offered to support him in the creation of an infinity environment in New York. (Besides the version in Bilbao, Mr. Wheeler has made works like it only two other times, in 1975 in Milan and in 1983 at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles.)

Mr. Zwirner said: "I told him: 'We'll give you carte blanche. I mean, we have to see a budget, but once we sign off on it, it's your baby.'"

For the last several weeks this baby, made from precisely curved and fitted fiberglass wall sections, special paints and resins and an elaborate combination of lights, has been growing clandestinely inside one of the Zwirner spaces on West 19th Street, behind papered-over windows. The exhibition, titled "SA MI 75 DZ NY 12," a reference to the initial 1975 work, will be the most expensive single installation ever mounted by the gallery, said Mr. Zwirner, who had been forewarned.

At the beginning, Mr. Wheeler said, he told Mr. Zwirner: "You know it's really hard to do that kind of piece, don't you? It's very hard to create absence."

Arguably more so than any other Light and Space artist Mr. Wheeler has made the quest to create a sense of absence — to enable people to perceive space and light in ways they normally cannot — a primary obsession. And his explorations of it were deeply influential in the formation of the loose movement of Los Angeles artists who began to work with light.

"Doug was really the first one out of the box with a lot of these ideas, doing things very early on," said the painter Ed Moses, who experimented with light environments himself in the 1960s. It was a heady, competitive time. "We were all friends," Mr. Moses said, "but we all wanted to get the first bite of something, not be the guy who got the second bite."

In subsequent years, he said, he believed Mr. Wheeler's role as a pioneer had been diminished in Mr. Irwin's and Mr. Turrell's favor, perhaps owing partly to the difficulty of both the work and the artist. "Even the museums wouldn't often do the kinds of things Doug needed them to do, either because of money or because he was just so exacting," Mr. Moses said. "He got very despondent about the whole thing, but he just kept on working."

In person Mr. Wheeler can seem at times like a low-key, latter-day New Mexico cowboy, with flowing white hair and Western-accented belts. But his resolve flashes through quickly, particularly in his reticence about being interviewed. (He said he managed to go more than a couple of decades without finally sitting for one again in 2008.) In talking about his work he is painstakingly methodical, particularly in trying to emphasize what it is not.

Works like the infinity room — which over about a half hour will gradually cycle from light that mimics dawn up to full daylight and then down to dusk — are not designed with the end purpose of creating illusion or destabilizing perception. The works are trying instead to use those things as tools to enable an experience of light and space in a much more direct way than is normally possible, "without," as Mr. Wheeler once wrote, "the diminishing effect of a learned associative response to explain away" the essence of what is being seen.

Growing up in rural Arizona, he said, he sometimes had such visceral experiences of light and space, almost Proustian in their power. They often occurred with his father, a doctor who became well known for barnstorming the state in a Stagger-wing Beechcraft to attend to patients in remote areas. In the air above the desert, the sky seen between massive cloudbanks could take on an otherworldly aspect.

"It created a torquing in space, a tension that I think is something my work has always tried to achieve," said Mr. Wheeler, who also became a pilot and flies a 1978 Cessna. "When I was growing up, the sky was everything for me."

Mr. Wheeler's family life was often tumultuous. There were times when his father would leave him for days with people he barely knew while he flew off to see patients. "That really did a number on me," he said. He became headstrong and refused baptism in his family's faith, Seventh Day Adventism, "because I thought that if I got baptized, it would change me, and I'd be like all these other people." (Today he divides his time between Santa Fe and Los Angeles with his wife, the film producer Bridget Johnson.)

He first began to find himself at Chouinard Art Institute, later the California Institute of the Arts, one of the most important crucibles of postwar Los Angeles talent, with students and faculty like Mr. Irwin, Ed Ruscha and John Baldessari. "I think I was actually pretty crazy in those days," Mr.

Wheeler said. "When I started school, they made me go see the shrink in order to keep my scholarship."

Like almost everyone he knew at the time he started out as a painter and made "some ugly, horrible stuff for a while." But it was a series of early paintings — large, mostly white canvases with polished-looking, bulletlike shapes in the corners — that began to lead him to his work with light. "Looking at them I started to realize that what was really important was the space between things," he said. This led by the late 1960s to works known as light encasements, squares of monochrome plastic with neon lights embedded along the edges, intended to be installed in white rooms with coved corners.

The curator Germano Celant, who included Mr. Wheeler in an influential exhibition of environment-based art at the 1976 Venice Biennale, said in an interview that he considered the kinds of immersive installations that Mr. Wheeler began to gravitate toward to be radical. "He was avoiding representation of any kind," said Mr. Celant, who is helping to compile a monograph for the Zwirner show. "There was nothing to see — only light. I think it was a big shift."

It has always been a shift as unearthly to experience as it is difficult to achieve, at least to Mr. Wheeler's standards. One day this month, as he surveyed painters slowly turning the inside of the installation a blinding, pristine white, he complained gravely that the floor had not been made the way he had wanted and, toward the end of an interview, he excused himself hurriedly with an exasperated look, saying, "I'm sorry, but I have a real crisis on my hands now."

Mr. Zwirner, the dealer, said that he hopes to represent Mr. Wheeler permanently, but that he will not allow himself any firm expectation of doing so until the show is over and Mr. Wheeler is happy. "I'm treading very lightly," he said. "I guess I'm always waiting for the other shoe to drop."

# Los Angeles Times

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## Shining a light on Light and Space art

The ethereal art that emerged from the 1960s and '70s is the subject of a new exhibition that is part of the Pacific Standard Time celebration. Doug Wheeler, a principal figure in the movement, and museum director Hugh Davies discuss.

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Doug Wheeler - artist in Pacific Standard Time  
An artist on art's effect on him.  
(1:48)

By **Jori Finkel**, *Los Angeles Times*  
September 18, 2011

The artists associated with Light and Space, the movement dedicated to investigating patterns of visual perception and attention that began in Southern California in the 1960s, are an unruly bunch.

Most reject the label out of hand. Two of the movement's giants, Robert Irwin and James Turrell, stopped speaking to each other decades ago and have never completely mended fences. One of the few women associated with this work, Maria Nordman, refuses to be in group shows on the subject. And Doug Wheeler, one of the first artists to make the shift from paintings to large-scale, mind-bending environments, routinely declines interviews.

So the mere fact that the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego was able to realize the exhibition and catalog for "Phenomenal: California Light,

Space, Surface," part of the region-wide Pacific Standard Time celebration, is something of a feat. Curators Robin Clark and Hugh Davies have brought together work by 13 of these artists (Nordman is the biggest omission), ranging from deliberately subtle light projections to slick so-called finish fetish work associated with surfboard and hot rod culture.

One of the largest pieces is a room-sized installation by Wheeler that messes with your senses: He has outfitted a gallery with more than 200 feet of recessed neon tubing in such a way that an entire wall dissolves into a hazy, penumbra-like effect. It is a re-creation of a piece from 1968.

"Doug was working ambiently, making spaces rather than objects, very early on. The only other person doing it back then was Jim Turrell with his projection pieces," says Davies, who is also the museum's director.

The Times convinced Wheeler to sit down with Davies and talk about the powers of perception — and the challenges of making and showing his work. It is the first in a monthly series of artist and curator interviews tied to Pacific Standard Time.

**Jori Finkel:** A lot of Light and Space artists who work on issues of attention and perception have lived in the desert. What is it about the desert that shapes or fuels this work?

**Doug Wheeler:** I grew up in rural Arizona, and when I was young, I'd have to get up at 4:30 a.m. and "ride" fence line, which was my chore before breakfast. The idea was to check different sections of the fence to repair any spots that were compromised. So at first it's dark and you can barely see, and then gradually the light is coming in. The sky was always everything. If there were a couple of scattered cumulous clouds, I found that the clouds created this sense of space, defining space, making it feel dimensional. You don't see that so much here, where there's so much pollution and clouds are two-dimensional-seeming. But out there there's a real sense of volume, when you look at the vault of the sky. That's what I started playing with as an artist: not looking at things but the tension between things.

**Hugh Davies:** I think it's no coincidence that many of the artists in our show lived in the desert and also flew a lot — your father was a doctor who flew all over the state to make house calls.

**DW:** He was called the flying doctor of Arizona. He had three Staggerwing Beechcraft airplanes — the Lear Jet of the '30s, they called them. He'd fly off to do surgeries in places where they didn't have access to hospitals.

**HD:** You grew up in the desert with the three-dimensional quality of clouds and the really expansive horizon. And Turrell, who also flies, lives out there now. And Bob Irwin at one point in his career left L.A. for Las Vegas, and that was about the desert. I think what distinguishes this body of work

from what's happening elsewhere in the world — particularly what's happening in urban New York — is the sense of horizontality and space versus verticality and claustrophobia almost.

DW: There are places you can go where you almost feel like you are the only living thing, and you become conscious of yourself in ways normally you're not.

JF: Is that one of your goals as an artist — to give us a desert-like experience where we become hyper-aware that we're in a particular body, at a particular time and place?

DW: One work that I want to do is called "Synthetic Desert" — I did a number of drawings for it. I call it synthetic because I don't think any of us — though landscape painters might object to this — can duplicate what makes up a desert experience. My idea is to create an environment where sound or lack of it, or the light or the modulation of it, might feel to you like in a desert landscape. But I'm not trying to create a diorama-like thing. The art is in no way competing to be the real thing.

JF: Like it or not, the term Light and Space came to encompass a mix of perceptual work that came out of Southern California in the 1960s. What's your feeling about the term?

HD: I like the fact it has "space" in it; to me that was the breakthrough of the work. The work became ambient and was about environmental experience instead of focusing on an object. New York minimalism, as I call it, was at that time very much obsessed with the object, and the objects were meant to be obdurate, cold, machine-made, obscuring the artist's hand. To me that was like the military-industrial complex — they used to make landing strips for Vietnam out of the same material that Carl Andre made his work from. Here it was more hand-made, with techniques borrowed from car culture or surfboard manufacturing or aerospace engineering. It was about translucence and transparency and this fabulous optical play that [Donald] Judd didn't get into until much later, when he started using Plexiglas. He came around to what artists of Southern California were doing all along.

DW: I don't like categories. They're just limiting. We all in our own individual ways have this idea of what we're doing. We think we're really special making work all by ourselves. I thought I found my own valley where nobody else was camping.

JF: Some other groupings like Pop Art or assemblage art seem less contentious. Is it because the artists grouped together under the Light and Space umbrella all have such strong personalities?

HD: I would say that a breakthrough occurred in the '60s amongst Southern California artists interested in the phenomenal and perception. They to a certain extent spurred each other on and to a certain extent ripped each other off. It's similar to the birth of Cubism, when you go back and ask the question: What exactly did Braque do, or Picasso, or Juan Gris? Well, with paintings it's a bit easier, because you can trace their exhibition history. But in the '60s this work was being shown in the artist studios [and] labs, where very few people saw it, so the chronology is difficult to ascertain. But personally I don't care who was the first one to find the vaccine, when there were four people here working at the same time and the discovery wouldn't have been made otherwise. I don't care who gets the Nobel Prize. I think the important thing is to celebrate what they all did as a group and introduce them to the next generation.

JF: Do you feel like artists at the time got more support from curators and collectors in Europe than from people closer to home?

DW: Without a doubt. My studio back then was an old dime store in Venice on Windward — it was big enough I could play basketball and ride a bike in it — and nobody ever came over. Then one day there's a knock on the door and it's Rudolf Zwirner and Hans Neuendorf, major art dealers from Germany, and Rudolf asked me to move to Germany, which I wasn't ready to do for personal reasons. The thing is: He knew. They knew. That's one reason why I like the idea of showing with David Zwirner [in New York] — he's Rudolf's son and I'll be showing some LED pieces with him next January.

HD: It was like the jazz musicians early on. They got a lot of support in Europe before they were recognized here — in France, Germany.

DW: And Italy, England also.

HD: The first place I saw Light and Space from California was the 1976 Venice Biennale, through Germano Celant's show "Ambiente" and going to see Count Panza di Biumo's place in Varese. I'm an East Coast guy who went to East Coast grad school, and this material was never on my radar.

JF: People get frustrated by some of the work because it seems under the radar in another way — it's barely there or hardly registers. A light beam is directed through a window. A wall is painted over. A scrim is hung.

HD: It happens in almost any new art form; when people don't know what they're looking at, they get upset. A lot of breakthrough paintings, from the Impressionists to Malevich, were hated at the time.

JF: Several Light and Space artists — I'm thinking of Bob Irwin now — went through periods when they refused to let people reproduce their installations in magazines or books. Are the works really that hard to photograph?

DW: I don't think you can photograph my work. In 1968, Time magazine did a piece called "Place in the Sun" and they wanted an image of one of my light encasements. And I said make it two colors, black and white, because then everybody will know we're just documenting the work, not trying to be it. So they made the image in the magazine green and blue. I don't think they understood what I meant.

HD: I think the fact that the work can't be photographed has really hurt its acceptance and dissemination. Pop Art photographs really well — it zips around the world. But how can a field of light be captured?

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## David Zwirner

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For immediate release

**DOUG WHEELER**

January 17 – February 25, 2012



DOUG WHEELER  
*Untitled – Environmental Light Installation, 1969*  
Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam. Photograph by Doug Chrismas; courtesy of the artist.

David Zwirner is pleased to present an ambitious new work by American artist Doug Wheeler (b. 1939), whose large-scale installations have rarely been seen in the United States. Built within the gallery's 519 West 19<sup>th</sup> Street space, Wheeler's *SA MI 75 DZ NY 12* (2012) explores the materiality of light while emphasizing the viewer's physical experience of infinite space. The exhibition marks the first presentation of an "infinity environment" by the artist in New York.

As a pioneer of the so-called "Light and Space" movement that flourished in Southern California in the 1960s and 1970s, Wheeler's prolific and groundbreaking body of work encompasses drawing, painting, and installations that are characterized by a singular

experimentation with the perception and experience of space, volume, and light. Raised in the high desert of Arizona, Wheeler began his career as a painter in the early 1960s while studying at the Chouinard Art Institute (now the California Institute of the Arts) in Los Angeles.

Wheeler's early white canvases incorporated abstract imagery that created a spatial dynamic and activated the central void of the painting's field. His practice quickly developed into the environmental aesthetic for which he is presently best known. In 1965, the artist made a transitional work in which he over-sprayed a canvas with subtle variations of white and installed neon tubes inside the back of the frame. Installed with a white floor, the painting appeared to float on the wall. Wheeler subsequently abandoned canvas altogether with a body of innovative, radiant works known as "fabricated light paintings" in which he applied lacquer to Plexiglas boxes that were illuminated from within by neon tubing. These "paintings" were followed by his "light encasements," which consist of large squares of painted vacuum-formed plastic with neon light embedded along the inside edges. Intended to be installed in a pristine white room with coved angles, these works dematerialize and create an immersive and spatially ambiguous environment that absorbs the viewer in the subtle construction of pure space. According to critic and curator John Coplans, who organized Wheeler's first solo exhibition at the Pasadena Art Museum in 1968, Wheeler's "primary aim as [an artist] is to reshape or change the spectator's perception of the seen world. In short, [his] medium is not light or new materials or technology, but perception."<sup>1</sup>

In 1969, at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam, Wheeler realized his first environmental installation outside of his studio—a "light wall"—using a single row of daylight neon light embedded inside a viewing aperture that encompassed the entire dimension of the gallery wall within an enclosed space. He stretched a nylon scrim to create a luminous "ceiling" that captured and reflected light and appeared to float above the room. Of this

type of work, Wheeler has said, "I wanted to effect a dematerialization so that I could deal with the dynamics of the particular space. It was a *real* space—not illusory—it was a cloud of light in constant flux. That molecular mist is the most important thing I do. It comes out of my way of seeing from living in Arizona—and the constant awareness of the landscape and the clouds."<sup>2</sup>

In subsequent exhibitions, Wheeler continued to explore similar effects by manipulating architecture with neon and fluorescent lighting, creating entire luminous rooms in which the viewer experienced the sensation of entering an infinite void. In 1975, for a solo exhibition at the Salvatore Ala Gallery, Milan, Wheeler executed the first of his "infinity environments" by creating an expansive all-white room that simulated dawn, day, and dusk in a continual succession. Wheeler created similar environments at only two other venues: the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles (1983), and the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao (2000). As the fourth of the artist's "infinity environments," the installation at David Zwirner will similarly replicate the transition from day to night.

Wheeler's first solo exhibitions were held at the Pasadena Art Museum (1968), Ace Gallery, Venice, California (1969), and Galerie Schmela, Düsseldorf (1970). His work was included in a number of important exhibitions in the 1970s and 1980s, including *Larry Bell, Robert Irwin, Doug Wheeler* (Tate Gallery, London, 1970); *Rooms* (PS1, New York, 1976); *Ambiente Arte* (Venice Biennale, 1976); and *Individuals: A Selected History of Contemporary Art, 1945-1986* (Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, 1986), among others. More recently, Wheeler's work was presented in *Selections from the Collection of Helga and Walther Lauffs* (Zwirner & Wirth/David Zwirner, 2008); *Time & Place: Los Angeles 1957-1968* (Moderna Museet, Stockholm, 2008-2009); and *Primary Atmospheres: Works from California 1960-1970* (David Zwirner, 2010). In 2008, Wheeler created an ice environment as part of his overall design for "*Upside Down: les Arctiques*," an exhibition of Eskimo and Inuit art at Musée du Quai Branly, Paris. He is currently featured in the exhibition *Phenomenal: California Light, Space, Surface* at the Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego, as part of the Getty Research Institute's *Pacific Standard Time* initiative. Work by the artist is held in major museum collections, including the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam; Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles; Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York; Los Angeles County Museum of Art; Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington D.C.; and the Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego. Wheeler lives and works in Santa Fe, New Mexico, and Los Angeles.

On the occasion of the exhibition, David Zwirner will publish the first extensive monograph devoted to the artist's work in collaboration with Steidl, Göttingen. The publication will contain rare archival documentation as well as new scholarship on the artist by Germano Celant.

#### Notes

- 1 John Coplans, *Doug Wheeler*. Exh. bro. (Pasadena: Pasadena Art Museum, 1968), n.p.
- 2 Doug Wheeler, cited in Jan Butterfield, "Douglas Wheeler," *The Art of Light and Space* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1993), p. 121.



## Mono 2012

This summer, 15 cultural institutions in the Saar and Lorraine regions and in the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg are organising an original approach to modern and contemporary art with the MONO event. From 1 June to 2 September 2012, 20 monographs by modern and contemporary artists will be presented across the wider region.

MONO is the fruit of cooperation between fifteen locations with their own programming and personality. Combining their specialist knowledge and their experience, they are creating a new dimension devoted to modern and contemporary art. 2007 saw a decisive first step being taken with the "Luxembourg European Capital of Culture" project. Modern and contemporary art institutions benefit from their exception location at the crossroads of major European North-South and East-West routes to consolidate the dynamism and the reality of their cultural network.

This has led to 20 artist monographs. Each institution will provide its own distinct way of presenting this type of exhibition to the public, thereby providing a mutually complementary network.

Moving beyond the works themselves, the viewing public is also invited to explore the locations playing host to each exhibition. The aim of the MONO event is for people to (re)discover some exceptional places offering up their true cultural treasures across the wider region. A 'MONO Passport' has been set up to make the whole process much easier, granting discounted entrance to the exhibitions and free usage of a network of shuttle buses connecting the various exhibition locations every Saturday.

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### PARTICIPATING VENUES ARE:

- **IN LUXEMBOURG:** Casino - Forum d'art contemporain and Mudam - Musée d'Art Moderne Grand-Duc Jean in Luxembourg; Centre National de l'Audiovisuel and Centre d'art Nei Liicht in Dudelange
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  - **IN LORRAINE (France):** Centre Pompidou-Metz; 49 Nord 6 Est - Frac Lorraine and Faux Mouvement in Metz; Château de Malbrouck in Manderen; Centre d'art contemporain - La synagogue in Delme
- 

