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Seeing Seeing, and Telling Telling: Framing and Transparency in Robert Kroetsch's *The Hornbooks of Rita K.* and James Turrell's "Twilight Arch"

Harry Vandervlist

American artist James Turrell occupies a prominent place in Robert Kroetsch's 2001 volume, *The Hornbooks of Rita K.* Turrell has been described as a "minimalist" and "conceptualist" artist whose best known works involve the creation of precisely lit, deliberately structured spaces which viewers enter in order to experience light. Often the light appears to form a solid shape, yet this effect diminishes as one approaches more closely. As Turrell has explained it: "these pieces are highly sensitive to your position, and on approach tend to dissolve to reveal their existence. This is like looking behind the stage to find the mirrors, only to discover there are none" (Didi-Huberman 117). In recent years Turrell has been creating such structured viewing spaces within Roden Crater, a volcano north of Flagstaff, Arizona.

Kroetsch signals Turrell's role in *The Hornbook* through one of the book's three epigraphs, which offers Axel Muller's description of Turrell's 1991 piece "Twilight Arch":

No object can be seen, no shadow. The picture's optical framework, made by light, has no foreground, middle or background. Everything is light—even the room. Here a process of perception begins that is hardly describable or nameable. The

gaze is now at rest. The constant and fruitless attempts to fix one's eye on something have been given up at last. (n.p.)

Further references to "Twilight Arch" appear throughout Kroetsch's book, most notably at its centre, where Rita disappears while viewing the artwork at the Frankfurt Museum of Modern Art. The significance and the humour attached to the notion of an absent central image could hardly be more clear:

There in Frankfurt, on the occasion of Rita's disappearance (and I was standing beside her in the darkened room where one believes one is looking at a framed painting only to discover, as one's eyes adjust to the dark, that one is staring into a faintly lit recession set blankly into a blank wall), I turned to remark that I found James Turrell's "Twilight Arch" compelling nevertheless, for all the absence of an image. I turned and she was not there. (53)

What is implied by this central presence of a singular work of visual art, in a book filled with poems, manuscripts, and correspondence? The critical context in which this question must be explored is, in the large sense, the context of discussions about the relation between textual and visual art. The question of Canadian literature and photography, for example, has been addressed by Linda Hutcheon (*The Canadian Postmodern: A Study of Contemporary English-Canadian Fiction*) and Lorraine York (*The Other Side of Dailiness: Photography in the Works of Alice Munro, Timothy Findley, Michael Ondaatje, and Margaret Laurence*). Within Alberta, authors and artists as diverse as Jane Ash Poitras ("2C Mother = E" and other works), Ernie Kroeger (*Crossing the Great Divide*), and Fred Wah (*Sentenced to Light*) have all forged distinctive combinations of text and image. This critical context is vertiginously enlarged as we move away from Canadian literature specifically, to include works by Rosalind Krauss, Roland Barthes, Jean Baudrillard, and others.

Kroetsch maps out his own distinctive path through this territory. He was of course steeped in the world of international postmodern culture, theory, and art practice from at least 1972 on, when with William V. Spanos he co-founded *boundary 2*, a journal of postmodern literature.

(See Robert David Stacey, *Re: Reading the Postmodern: Canadian Literature and Criticism After Modernism*, for a fuller discussion of this area.) The intersection of photography, video, and other visual arts with text was a mainstay of much work at the time—think of the now-iconic work of Barbara Kruger and Jenny Holzer, or Laurie Anderson, for example. Kroetsch's distinct form of the postmodern conjunction of text and image, however, shows less interest in mass-media imagery and “memes” than in what Donald Lawrence and William F. Garrett-Petts call “picture space,” and in particular, vernacular modes of visual imagery. As they point out in *PhotoGraphic Encounters: The Edges and Edginess of Reading Prose Pictures and Visual Fictions*, Kroetsch includes snapshots of himself in his first collection of critical essays, *The Lovely Treachery of Words: Essays Selected and New* (1989). The casual documentary mode of these snapshots shows Kroetsch's interest in what Lawrence and Garrett-Petts call “the vernacular mode of self-representation”:

Like oral story-telling, photography hints at an ostensibly artless, certainly vernacular, mode of expression . . . For Kroetsch, the photograph, especially the snapshot, is part of what he calls the “great-given,” the flow of vernacular culture, the “particulars of place” that the writer may draw upon: “newspaper files, place names, shoe boxes full of photographs, tall tales, diaries, journals, tipi rings, weather reports, business ledges, voting records . . . archaeological deposits (*Lovely Treachery* 7). These are the tokens of lived experience; personally invested, these forms of vernacular expression stand apart from the words and images of mass, popular and high art cultures. (219)

Not only has Kroetsch mined such stores of visual vernacular material in his work, but for him the printed page has also often worked as a visual field, as in, for example, *The Ledger* and *Seed Catalogue* with their conjunction of spatially-organized documents with poetic text, but also in poems such as “Mile Zero.” In so much of Kroetsch's work, then, visual imagery, spacing, and page layout all “speak” in their interactions with, and their difference from, text itself. I certainly agree with Lawrence and Garrett-Petts's view that when Kroetsch employs visual elements, he does not aim to offer a complement or “counterbalance” to text, resulting in

something he critiques in *Labyrinths of Voice* as “equilibrium or stasis” (Neuman and Wilson 126). Instead he aims to “animate, rather than freeze, representation” (Lawrence and Garret-Petts 220) through ambivalent acts of juxtaposition and mutual (re)framing.

Briefly, then, this is the context for Kroetsch’s choice of Turrell’s work as a crucial reference in *The Hornbooks*—a choice which demands focused interpretive scrutiny, as Turrell is a singular artist. His works rely on sight, but they are not visual art objects in the usual sense. As such they could never be “reproduced” as “illustrations” in Kroetsch’s text. Early in Turrell’s career, Willoughby Sharp said “Turrell’s breakthrough was that he had broken out of the need for material objects to create a highly intense aesthetic experience” (qtd in Adcock 53). Perhaps similarly, *The Hornbooks of Rita K.* is not a poetry collection, a narrative, or a work of poetics in the usual sense, though I believe it partakes of all of them. Indeed Kroetsch’s epigraph seems to signal that Turrell’s unusual visual artworks and his own unusual book share several interests and strategies: both engage the concepts of framing and transparency in various senses; both direct their audience’s attention, not toward represented objects, but toward an awareness of fundamental artistic processes; and finally, both reach toward a common grounding in elements that are ubiquitous and shared, yet somehow not seen or “transcended” in ordinary experience.

While noting these interesting intersections, I think it is important to remain aware of the different types of analysis each form of work seems able to support. For example, an initial point of convergence between Turrell and Kroetsch would seem to be their use of “framing” and “transparency”—but these concepts need to be applied in the slightly different senses appropriate to the verbal and visual arts. In the hornbooks, framing and transparency appear quite literally in the image of the historical artifact, the hornbook itself:

Framed and wearing a handle, covered in transparent horn, it sets out to fool no one. It says its say. Rita Kleinhart seems not to have got a handle on this realization. What she claimed for her poems was exactly that which they did not provide: the clarity of the exact and solitary visible page. The framed truth, present and unadorned. Not a page for the turning, no,

but rather the poem as relentless as a mirror held in the hand.
(Kroetsch, *Hornbook* 30, 23)

The hornbook as an artifact relies on physical framing—the short texts presented in this limiting, focusing format were used as primers or to teach alphabets—and literal transparency. However, Raymond, as editor, archivist, and also Rita's would-be or actual lover, immediately makes the leap to the figurative notion of transparent clarity of signification. Rita's poems never offered such easy clarity, he says. The idea of "getting a handle on" Rita's poems, of their easy manageability, is also raised only to be mocked.

A new frame, a conceptual one this time, is created through this process of opposing the hornbook's evident straightforwardness to the "real" experience of reading Rita's poems, which Raymond suggests has more to do with obliqueness and opacity than directness and clarity. Now the reader has a nice set of oppositions within which to situate Rita's poetry: clarity versus opacity; directness versus indirection; the isolated page versus the complicating narrative context; the "truth, present and unadorned," versus the fleeting traces of Rita, absent and commented upon at length by Raymond. As an editor—the classic character used in "framing narratives"—Raymond is bound to operate on this kind of interpretive level. He offers a context for Rita's works, he arranges her remains for viewing. But he does not stop there. As a lover, Raymond is preoccupied with Rita herself: with her actual presence. For him the poems are traces of something else, clues even, like the postcards he receives. He desires to read through them to Rita herself, to what he wants to read as their story. Yet they remain, insistently, themselves: mounds of paper, perhaps even burial mounds recording a vanished presence.

The structure of Kroetsch's book, with its two key figures Raymond and Rita, along with the work performed by this kind of conceptual framing, is what makes the book into a "trace structure" (to use Dawne McCance's term for it). McCance describes the way the book's two central figures operate as "two hands at once" which create "a hesitation between them" ("Still Life"). But what is this "hesitation," this space between: is it a gap which readers fill? Is it blankness, absence, "nothing?" Does this space make Rita's "disappearance . . . a mode of entrance," a space "for play and entrance?" (McCance, "Art of Building" 168). Is it a "transparency" through which significance can be glimpsed? Is it, as McCance describes

it, the space in which we realize that “the poem is not constituted by the idea of the poem or the idea of the poet, but by the sociality of writing, the poem as materialized supplement ceaselessly reinventing itself as it moves through the world” (“Still Life”). Just as historical hornbooks realized themselves, not through aesthetic contemplation but through social use in bringing children into the realm of language, does *The Hornbooks of Rita K.* realize itself by bringing readers into the realm of writing?

These questions can perhaps be illuminated by a glance at the parallels and contrasts offered by Turrell’s visual works. If Kroetsch’s book evokes a set of conceptual oppositions in order to frame the absent Rita, to make a question of her, of her work, and of our reading and *writing* of it—then how might this correspond in any way to the procedures behind a work such as Turrell’s “Twilight Arch”?

Turrell makes use of literal frames, just as the historic hornbook did, in order to direct attention. “Twilight Arch” is framed within architectural space. As viewers enter a room, their sight is oriented toward what Raymond called “a faintly lit recession set blankly into a blank wall” (Kroetsch, *Hornbook* 53). Yet the viewer’s experience has little in common with the conventional experience of viewing a physical art object. In response to the question “what is Turrell’s art about?” Daniel Birnbaum writes:

About light and perception, one is tempted to answer. Perhaps it would be more correct to say: his art is light and perception. Turrell’s works do not represent anything. They are themselves: light and darkness, space and perception. His installations manipulate the conditions of our perception rather than present object of aesthetic contemplation. This is art liberated from all objects. It is not about what is before but rather what is behind our eyes—about the preconditions of seeing and the limits of perceptions. (227)

Turrell himself has said, “I am really interested in the qualities of one space sensing another. It is like looking at someone looking. . . . As you plumb a space with vision it is possible to see yourself see. This seeing, this plumbing, imbues space with consciousness” (Adcock 227). The profundity of such perceptions may be suggested by Jacques Lacan’s contention that

“consciousness, in its illusion of *seeing itself seeing itself*, finds its basis in the inside-out structure of the gaze” (82).

Here we can begin to see one potential correspondence between Kroetsch’s and Turrell’s strategies. Both work, not so much with represented objects, but through manipulating the most fundamental transactions of their artistic activities: in Kroetsch’s case, reading, and in Turrell’s, viewing. In literature, it may be difficult to imagine “art liberated from all objects,” but less difficult to see how a written work might engage “preconditions and the limits of perceptions.” (Kroetsch’s comments on literature as a game in *Labyrinths of Voice* [Neuman and Wilson 56-57] for example, engage the idea of reading’s “preconditions.”)

The notion of the frame may serve as one such fundamental precondition, shared by both readers of works in language and viewers of visual artworks. Turrell’s installations, at least before the Roden Crater project, were usually situated in familiar types of space: the Mendota Hotel in California, for example, or art galleries. His initial task in creating works was always a kind of “emptying out,” something Kroetsch has called “fundamental to any making of art” (*Lovely Treachery* 34). Familiar objects would be removed, all surface decoration eliminated, so that the light installation could fill the space with “absence, and make the work out of it, its opening” (Didi-Huberman 47). This “absence,” framed by the familiar viewing space, becomes the space where viewers “see themselves seeing.”

Part of what makes this effect possible is the play of the frame. By projecting light in such a way that his fields of colour appear to have solid edges (sometimes solid enough that viewers have attempted to lean against them), Turrell appears to offer a “depth” that is “framed.” Daniela Zyman describes one such work as follows:

Through the powerful blue glint at its very outer edge, the brilliant monochrome color field appears to lose itself in an unfathomable darkness, into a “there” which does not reveal itself. The viewer’s vision can take no hold and turns back to the yellow frame in order to re-immense himself into the depth of the space to define it. (19)

It is between the edge or frame, and the “depth” that the viewer’s seeing oscillates, revealing the need for an object, a “there” to focus on, and the

need for an edge or a limit. As Craig Adcock has it, “Turrell’s homogenous visual fields ... stimulate the eyes but do not provide enough data for “things” or “objects” with names to be perceived by the receiver” (227). In this way, he says, they “present the viewer with something very like “wordless thought” (227).

Turning to *The Hornbooks of Rita K.*, can we discern a similar role for the frame in making visible some fundamental artistic conditions? I would argue that the parallel with Turrell’s work emerges in the way the *Hornbooks* contends with the concepts of the writer and the self, and their presence or absence. Rita, the writer, ought to be the “object” at the centre of the framed space set up by a volume bearing her name. Yet Rita is an absent presence: she cannot be finally located, either in her poems or in her house. As Dawne McCance suggests, *The Hornbooks’* version of autobiography, of Rita’s autobiography, follows the logic of supplementarity: rather than delivering “a deposit of self-referential content to be hermeneutically unsealed,” autobiography, for Rita, “inscribes the writing process itself, the play of the frame, the insistent crossing of inside and out” (“Art of Building” 162).

James Turrell also links his work to this threshold phenomenon, this play “between”: he says “I’m interested in the point where imaginative seeing and outside seeing meet, where it becomes difficult to differentiate between seeing from the inside and seeing from the outside” (Didi-Huberman 130). Or, as Zyman puts it, “Turrell reinforces the enigmatic nature of space and its dimensionality by materializing the space in between—the transitory” (18). This formulation recalls McCance’s description of “the poem as materialized supplement” (“Still Life”). It is through framing this transitional space, whether it is the space of viewing, reading, or writing, that Turrell and Kroetsch materialize the very artistic activity in which their audiences are engaged.

I’ve been attempting to suggest how both Turrell and Kroetsch make use of framing in order to manifest some basic processes of their respective art forms. I also suggested at the outset that both artists reach toward a grounding in elements that are ubiquitous and shared, yet which are somehow “transcended” or not seen in ordinary experience. It is here that the differences between their respective forms begin to be clear.

What Turrell’s viewers “see themselves seeing” is light, that ubiquitous and fundamental element of all sight, which is itself rarely perceived in its

own right. As Craig Adcock puts it, “the centrality of light for existence notwithstanding, seeing light, just light, is unusual.” Humans generally “comprehend the information contained in the light that is reflected from objects in the world.” Yet in Turrell’s works, viewers confront precisely “light as such” and “mere illumination” (221).

Readers of *The Hornbooks* are perhaps invited to experience a different, yet analogous awareness of something whose “centrality for existence” makes it generally invisible. In *The Hornbooks*, the image of the “back door” seems to summarize a complex of notions related to this theme. Rita’s project in “collective biography” located itself “literally and momentarily” among whatever is ignored, denied, rejected—that is, invisible—yet also shared. Her references to “back doors,” partly through their link to *collective* biography, seem to me to imply sociality. “Back doors,” she claims, “are the very locus of discharge and communality” (Kroetsch, *Hornbook* 11). Rita asks “what is more precious to our collective biography than those very things we elect to conceal or discard?” (11). Here at this level commonly denominated “low,” she sought, according to Raymond, escape from several things: from “transcendence,” “good neighbours,” and “possibly from language itself” (9). At the same time Rita is described as seeking, if not escape from language, at least “another possibility in language.” Perhaps this other possibility lies in her own writing, which “she reckons ... is freighted with no end of traces that were neither literal nor metaphoric” (14).

But what “language” can escape the territory between those two poles, the letter and all the types of figuration represented by the metaphor? I believe the choice of the hornbook as a central image evokes the idea, if not the actual availability, of a type of exchange that lies *avant la lettre*. The hornbook, as a type of primer, marks that social and linguistic threshold that we cross when we first learn our letters. The hornbooks’ association with sheer unmediated directness, mere transparent *monstrance*, suggests a clarity that requires no words. In this way the hornbooks evoke exchanges so primary that they precede or obviate language. Such exchanges may be bodily, like those Raymond says he shared with Rita. They may be gestural. Or they may involve a simple *constatation* of the world: seeing without looking. Perhaps it is this that led Kroetsch to conclude with an image of “not the sought after needle,” but the blindingly obvious “haystack in the field by the lane” (91).

If “the poem itself is at best a trace of what is fundamental and now forgotten” (87), how then, “The Hollow Hornbook” asks, to “give it a surface that lets the eye hear?” The question seems compatible with Turrell’s project of making visible the fundamental and forgotten properties of light and perception. Perhaps just as Turrell frames absence in order to foreground seeing itself, so *The Hornbooks* frames a gap, a transitional space, in order to make visible some fundamental, forgotten back-door elements of the game of writing. What “mere illumination” is to Turrell, so the body, desire, the absent other, the self as a mere trace may be to *The Hornbooks of Rita K.*

Kroetsch’s framed absences in *The Hornbooks* may recall what he refers to in his essay “Reciting the Emptiness,” as “the gap” which “tells us more than the bridge” (*Lovely Treachery* 35). Rita seems to me to be evoking a gap, something central or fundamental, yet invisible, something “unspeakable,” unreadable. In “Reciting the Emptiness,” Kroetsch suggests that the gap “may have a lot to do, not with the stories we share, but with our attempts at sharing stories” (40).

This exploration of framed absence in the *Hornbooks* may suggest some convergences between visual works, such as Turrell’s art and Kroetsch’s writing—but it also aims to reveal a key difference. Although Turrell’s viewers may “see themselves see,” and may be brought to a changed awareness of their own perception, this remains an individual affair. Turrell has said that “I feel my work is made for one being, one individual” (Douglas). What is more, Turrell conceives of his work as leading out of language altogether: “My work has no object, no image and no focus. With no object, no image and no focus, what are you looking at? You are looking at you looking. What is important to me is to create an experience of wordless thought” (Turrell). Viewers who cross his carefully crafted thresholds between “inside” and “outside” seeing may do so as solitary perceivers encountering light and space. Private visual perception remains conceivable in a way that private language does not. As a work of language, however, *The Hornbooks of Rita K.* retains irreducibly social elements. The work compels readers to recognize that the thresholds crossed here are those between self and other, reader and writer. They are the everyday, back door thresholds across which the fundamentally social exchanges of language—our not-necessarily successful “*attempts* (my emphasis) at sharing stories”—all take place. The frame of the back door may not contain

a static, finished product—a “story,” much less “the” story of, say, “Rita K.”— so much as it offers a space for further, ongoing telling. Kroetsch’s reader can hardly avoid becoming an activated reader, a teller in turn, of stories prompted by the scraps of lived life. In this way perhaps Turrell and Kroetsch do converge, despite their differences, in their shared emphasis on leading viewers and readers to something framed and offered, which makes visible or activates within viewers and readers the very processes that generate the work.

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