

The Age of Immersion

Larry Bell

THE LIGHT AND SPACE MOVEMENT EMERGED IN THE MID-20TH CENTURY DURING WIDESPREAD TECHNOLOGICAL OPTIMISM. HOW HAS IT EVOLVED IN THE DIGITAL AGE?

Larry Bell (b. 1939) doesn't know exactly what his new show at Hauser and Wirth, London, will look like yet. "It really has to do with the architecture of the space, and the colour relationships suggested by the structures," he states, over a crackling phone-line from his home in the New Mexico mountains. In other words, the works will emerge in relation to the gallery when he sets foot on-site. Bell has been widely celebrated since the 1960s for his signature tinted glass cubes and standing walls. Notably, he uses a unique metallic film-coating process that imbues translucent surfaces with a delicate tonal spectrum, simulating the effects of shadow and light, playfully provoking the senses. Many of Bell's recent sculptures comprise square enclosures set around smaller, four-sided constructions, generating complex optical effects. However, the object of fascination (in all cases) extends beyond materials: it encompasses the atmosphere created through light absorption, transmission and reflection.

Now in his 80s, Bell remains open to new developments – or, as he puts it, "I have no plans to change anything, and I have no reason to believe that I won't change." The statement is suitably open-ended for an artist whose career has been informed by serendipity. Bell began studying at the Los Angeles Chouinard Art Institute – later incorporated into CalArts – during the late 1950s, hoping to become a film animator. However, under the tutelage of Robert Irwin (b. 1928), Bell explored various styles of abstract painting before fixating on glass. "I was doing very simple hard-edged paintings that represented a volume – a cube or something else," he recalls, "and I decided to make the actual volumes."

Bell was amongst a group of likeminded artists, which included John McCracken (1934-2011), Fred Eversley (b. 1941), Helen Pashgian (b. 1934), James Turrell (b. 1943) and Doug Wheeler (b. 1939). They became famous for creating walkthrough artworks with meditative or even spiritual qualities, saturating whole environments with the glow of natural or artificial light. The constant sunlight of California's valleys and deserts undoubtedly fed the group's imagination. However, the Light and Space school was also responding to an era of scientific and technological advancement. Outer space was being explored for the first time, whilst ocean beds were probed and studied, early computers being programmed, and cybernetic theories advanced. A consumer boom was occurring, fuelled by post-war economic revival and a demand for higher living standards. This was coupled with the global spread of capitalism and the ever-increasing availability of plastic, a magic material that could seemingly be used to make everything from clothes and furniture to toys.

All of this change was associated with a broad spirit of social optimism, for all the malaise of the Cold War (1947-1989). Certainly, a sense of technological enquiry informed the work of the Light and Space milieu, albeit in a somewhat scattergun approach, according to Bell. State-of-the-art materials such as epoxy and acrylic resins – some of them used by the military and aerospace industries and only recently declassified because of their role during WWII – were seized on by artists for their reflective, translucent and futuristic properties. Fred Eversley even worked as a NASA engineer at the Wyle Laboratories in El Segundo before becoming a full-





Installation view, *Larry Bell, From the '60s*, Hauser & Wirth, New York, 2016. © Larry Bell. Courtesy the artist and Hauser & Wirth. Photo: Genevieve Hanson.

“How is the optimistic, future-oriented spirit of the Light and Space movement thriving in this new paradigm? And why are we still be fascinated by light when we can’t get away from it?”

Previous Page:
Installation view, *Whitney Biennial*, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, 2017. © Larry Bell. Courtesy the artist and Hauser & Wirth. Photo: Timothy Schenk.

Left:
Larry Bell, *Standing Walls*, 1969/2016, Clear and grey glass, 10 panels, each panel: 243.8 x 182.8 x 1.3 cm / 96 x 72 x 1/2 inches. © Larry Bell. Courtesy the artist and Hauser & Wirth. Photo: JR Doty.



time sculptor, bringing tools and techniques with him. The automotive, surfing and commercial signage businesses supplied other substances that could also be appropriated to creative ends, such as spray lacquers used to cover cars.

The film-coating processes that gave Bell’s work creative lift-off, meanwhile, relied on another stalwart of California culture: the film industry. The coated glass cubes he began to create during the 1960s were initially made with a cinema lighting specialist, who was producing colour filters for Walt Disney. Later, Bell’s technique was refined based on discussions with a New York company that covered Christmas tree baubles and toy pistols in reflective silver. The business owner subsequently sold Bell his first coating “tank”, a large unit in which sheets of plastic could be suspended and drenched in a very fine metallic spray.

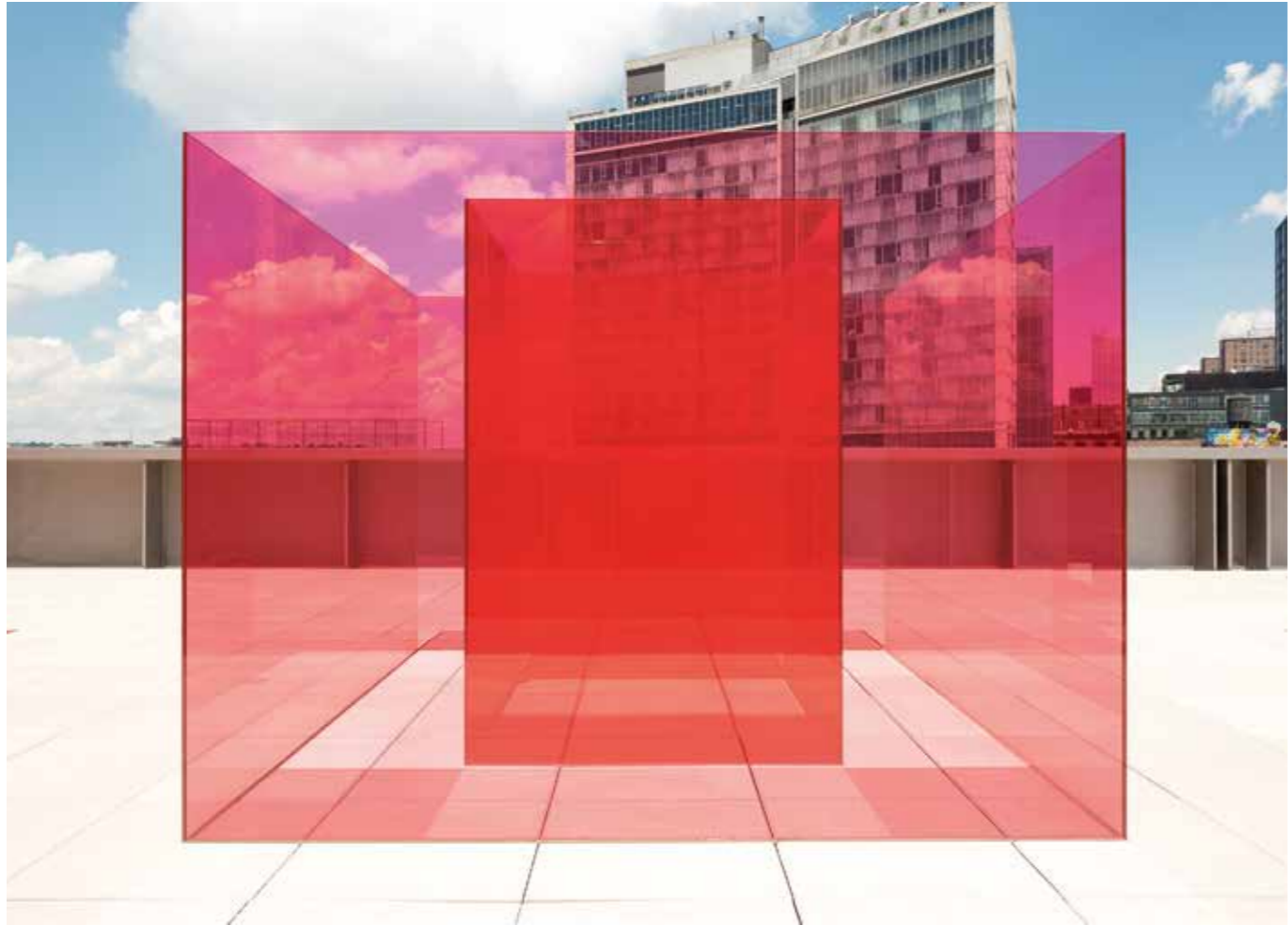
Many of the technologies discovered by Bell and his contemporaries are now ubiquitous. “Certainly, the kind of process that I was using was extremely influential in the development of modern technology. Everything from phones to computers uses thin film technology to produce electrical contacts.” But for Bell, “the connection to technology is not why this stuff brings joy. I am just interested in how things look. When you’re young and confident, you just go for it.”

In 2022, *Light and Space* is enjoying a renaissance. A major group show at Copenhagen Contemporary brings together early works of the movement with new inventions from its most feted practitioners, including pieces from James Turrell’s *Ganzfeld* series: depthless light chambers designed to instil sensory deprivation. Subsequent generations of artists are also represented in Copenhagen, making for the first major collective retrospective of *Light*

and *Space* in Europe. Meanwhile, new works by Turrell and Robert Irwin have recently been unveiled at major institutions such as Kraftwerk Berlin and Pace Gallery, New York.

At the same time, many practitioners have developed far more critical relationships to the industrial materials and processes that inspired Bell. Throwing away consumer culture has precipitated a tidal wave of non-recyclable waste, whilst the late-20th century explosion in international air travel has contributed substantially to a climate crisis that was still a conceptual dot on the horizon during the 1960s. In this context, when billionaires such as Jeff Bezos and Elon Musk wax on the promises of space travel, *Light and Space* seems to provide an escape from a damaged planet. Today, it’s hard to imagine that any movement would respond to the technologies wrapped up with these social, environmental and economic trends in the same wide-eyed spirit as Bell and his compatriots adopted in 1960s California.

On top of this, a large proportion of the population now spends much of its time assailed by light-waves as we scroll through media on laptops, phones and tablets, endlessly refocusing our attention. The optical and cognitive effects of all this extended screen time have been exacerbated over the last two years with so many of us driven online for work and social activities during the pandemic. Science blogs and journals are awash with articles cataloguing the negative impacts on our attention spans, mental health and visual aptitude, with a term, “Computer Vision Syndrome”, coined to describe the negative effects. A 2018 study, published in the *British Medical Journal*, suggests that its prevalence may be up 50% or more in computer users. (Amy Sheppard and James Wolffsohn, *Digital Eye Strain*)



Installation view, *Whitney Biennial*, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, 2017. © Larry Bell. Courtesy the artist and Hauser & Wirth. Photo: Timothy Schenk.

How is the optimistic, future-oriented spirit of *Light and Space* thriving in this new paradigm? And why are we still fascinated by light when we can't get away from it? There is an argument that *Light and Space* is amenable to the very social media platforms that have shifted the parameters of our perception, with its bold colours and simple dynamic forms requiring little intellectual mediation. However, much light art asks viewers to bring a sustained ruminative attention that is hard to muster when surfing Instagram.

It's perhaps more relevant to note that human beings' relationship with light stretches back to the beginning of history. Think of the solar deities of ancient civilisations or myths surrounding the constellations – the lights of the sky were amongst our first points of emotional and intellectual anchorage in the universe, objects of primordial fascination and worship. Light art has often been associated with the idea of the Sublime, that awe-inspiring sense of an encounter with a timeless force or truth far greater than oneself. Perhaps this is the core "feeling" which Bell wants people to draw from his work, and which he insists we are still capable of accessing, even in the hyper-digital age.

That said, artists building on Bell's legacy are more likely to perceive light and space as forces impacted by human activity. Luminosity, reflection, refraction: these ambient effects are no longer the preserve of private creative encounters. When Olafur Eliasson (b. 1967) bathed the Tate Modern's Turbine Hall in the stark black-and-yellow beams of a waning sun for *Weather Project* (2003) he was remaking *Light and Space* for the age of climate anxiety. Since then, figures such as Andrea Polli (b. 1968), who works with vast outdoor displays to visualise air pollution and other envi-

ronmental data, have extended the legacy of the style Bell helped to define in a spirit of ecological activism.

So much for *Light and Space* in the age of global warming – but what about digital technology? Can the steady, fine-tuned awareness that artists such as Bell require of viewers be expected of contemporary audiences, with all their digital distractions? "There is an argument that pervasive technology now affects us in such a way that we're less capable of the kind of attention that my work requires," Bell states. For all its beauty and immediate pull on the senses, his pieces also ask us to concentrate and linger: to spot incremental differences in qualities of light based on the placement of panes of glass at certain angles or distances, or to second-guess the impression of natural shadow on a plane of glass created by a gradient of metallic skin.

Then again, perhaps the art that Bell and his peers create is needed now more than ever, for that very reason. Can it replicate some of the basic sensory qualities of our encounters with the computer or phone screen and use them in the service of a creative experience that is slow, focused, meditative, restoring? Bell is unsure of this explanation. For him, *Light and Space's* renewed popularity partly reflects the arbitrary cycles of the art market, which is forever seizing on the "new thing" before digesting it in retrospect half a century later. However, it's also because that longing for connection to something beyond our own thoughts and concerns, a yearning for the Sublime, even, survives all. "I suspect that everyone who makes the decision to go and look at a piece of art, or go to a museum, or stop in front of a sculpture still has the same thirst or hunger. There's a need for the improbable experiences that art provides."

Right:
Larry Bell, *Something Green*, Venet
Foundation Sculpture Garden, Le Muy,
France. Photo credit: Xinyi Hu, Courtesy
Venet Foundation.

Words
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