

Postcard from Varese

frieze, 2014

Set in the cedar-dotted hills of Lombardia, above the town of Varese, the Villa Panza is the former home of the prominent collector Guiseppe Panza di Buimo. Varese is one of those Milanese second home kind of places, where on a Sunday afternoon several generations eat gelati together in the alleys of the old town, dressed with *sprezzatura*. The villa's outlook is pastoral, its gardens rolling but carefully cultivated in a pseudo-English style: pruned foliage along a gravel path, mowed grass that curves down to a sheltered pond, besides which the season's first drooping cherry blossom.

An eighteenth century Italian villa is not the most usual context for American conceptual art, but the location hosts an exhibition of works by James Turrell and Robert Irwin, 'Aisthesis, At the origins of sensations', the pair of artists that Count Panza di Buimo, early champion of the Light and Space movement in Italy, also commissioned to make site-specific interventions into the residence during the 1970s. The exhibition brings together the correspondence of the Milanese collector and the Californian artists – the postcards that passed from Northern Italy to Los Angeles, "*Greetings from the Lavender Pit Copper Mine*" – and extends the dialogue beyond Panza's death, by displaying other works loaned from US collections.

After meeting Robert Irwin at New York's Pace Gallery, Panza di Biumo soon became enamoured with the Light and Space movement, and its experiments with sensory effects and psychological phenomena. Introduced by Irwin to James Turrell, the exchange would last several decades, culminating in permanent installations to his own abode. What emerges from the narrative of their correspondence, set in the villa's context, is how Panza was taken in at first by the artists' radical treatment of art beyond the object, with site-conditioned ideas that had yet to gain prevalence in Italy in the 1960s; then by the mystique of phenomenology that surrounds much of their work; and further, by the romantic notion of ragged American canyons, the landscape that lies beyond Los Angeles's sprawl.

It was the search for a sublime kind of connection, as well as a declared interest in the sciences behind it, that called Panza to Los Angeles, home to LACMA's Art & Technology programme, where Turrell and Irwin were running their Ganzfeld experiments into the phenomena of perception. We see the bifurcating paths the pair took after these early trials in two new installations in the villa's external buildings. The stables host *Sight Unseen* (2013), a Ganzfeld by Turrell, whose saturated yellow envelops like a buttercup's glow; its

trippy, boundless warmth a contrast to the prim borders of the lawns. Irwin's *Varese Scrim 2013* is installed in the orangery, where long cut-out slots in the walls allow natural light in and provide lines of sight onto the garden, while a series of fine gauze screens make for a geometry of translucent whiteness, according to visitors' progression through these rhythmic spatial divisions. The ideas of both artists on the relationship between exterior stimuli and interior effects made a deep impression on Panza in the '70s: 'This was a new world that could only be understood by experiencing it and having an encounter that was not simply mental but [to do] with a reality outside oneself', he remembered. Beyond LACMA, Panza would visit Turrell's legendary Santa Monica studio at the Mendota Hotel, fly over the Arizonan desert to observe the ever-in-progress Roden Crater project, and host the artist back in Varese, 'when the nights are long and the silence is profound through the empty villa' (Panza). Here Turrell even claimed to have witnessed the ghost of the previous owner, the Marquis Menafoglio, 'in his sumptuous eighteenth century clothes'.

Given the focus of *Arte Ambiente* – a term that Panza coined to bring an awareness of this art to Italy – on precise spatial context, the historical backdrop of the villa at first feels at odds with the conceptual effect of the works. Turrell's hologrammic triangles glow in a corridor furnished with red velvet and gold chairs, and an Irwin Dot Painting (1963–5), a canvas of almost imperceptible tiny red and green dots into which the spectator is absorbed, hangs beneath an ornately plastered ceiling. A video interview is installed in what seems to be a repurposed grey marble bathroom. We are at home with the collector, reminded of the old wealth invested in new, contemporary art. Elsewhere, one of Irwin's slender transparent acrylic columns refracts the light from French windows onto a panelled parquet floor (2011). Through the column through the windows, you can perceive the shades of green of the garden, and beyond that, the hills: the column reaches towards an equilibrium of art, architecture and nature that the collector supported.

Panza wanted to live in a place where the exterior environment complemented the interior space completely, and when his plans for creating a large-scale Conceptual art museum in Italy were rejected, he was compelled to commission Irwin and Turrell for the villa. Expressing an haute-bourgeois wish to be surrounded whenever possible by aesthetic pleasures, he sought '[...] a situation in which the discrepancy between the beauty I desired and reality was abolished.' But more than just the classical acquisition of material objects, this was a desire to possess something all-encompassing, a total situation derived from space and architecture, that could nevertheless be one's own. Of course now, the villa is public, and to give him his due, the Count's horizons for exhibiting had once stretched to the renovation of Milan's Palazzo Reale. He also had visions for many other unrealized museums in Europe, including the Environmental Art Museum, something like the Dia:Beacon in scale. Neatly inked capitals on grid paper list Dan Flavin, Donald Judd, Sol

Lewitt, Joseph Kosuth, Agnes Martin and Bruce Nauman among those he wanted to import: it was perhaps only when he couldn't persuade the Italian traditionalists that so much space should be dedicated to Americans that he turned seriously to the space of his own home.

After passing through the once lived-in rooms in which the temporary exhibition is displayed, you arrive at the true transfiguration of palazzo to art space: a long corridor whose light shifts in sunset shades – the passage dedicated to an extensive collection of Dan Flavin (not strictly part of this show) – followed by the six permanent structural interventions by Irwin and Turrell. Notes and plans for the design of these works reveal Panza's fine-tuning of the environment of each.

'Think of the Egyptian Tombs carved into the heart of the mountains, where sculpture, reliefs, paintings, architecture, are all coordinated to the same end and where, only twice a year, at the time of the equinoxes, a sunbeam entered an almost invisible opening to illuminate the Pharaoh's countenance.'

This is what Panza imagined, in an article on the Environmental Art Museum, and it is this sensitivity to quasi-sacred spatial conditions that can be felt in the villa's final chambers. Turrell's *Lunette* (1976) filters crepuscular light through a crescent-shaped window at the end of a vaulted corridor, while Irwin's original *Varese Scrim* (1973) creates a passage with a semi-transparent partition wall leading to a rectangular opening, as the viewer approaches, quite literally, the light at the end of the tunnel. The square cut-out of one of Turrell's 'Skyspaces' (1976) – the first I've visited – brings a twenty-two degree sky into a squinty square room, where, in the absence of excess visual stimulation, the sounds of airplanes and restless birds reverberate with soaring thoughts.

But perhaps the quietest, most reflective piece to work at the border between architecture and its surroundings is Robert Irwin's *Varese Portal Room* (1973). A deep window, without pane, provides a point of observation onto the scenery outside, and reminds us how our understanding of landscape depends on framing – particularly that of landscape painting. Still our viewing experience, thanks to our perceptual and physical presence in the chamber, remains three-dimensional. Light and air stream into the whitewashed, skewed room, to make a space for contemplation, an ideal lookout, a privileged border between inside and outside. It functions on a plane with Stéphane Mallarmé's description of the window as the 'crystallization of reality into art'; but there's a reciprocity, always, between the two: real and represented, what we sense within us, and what we see outside.¹ Here we are not so much in the villa, as in the work of art; but without the villa's walls or its countryside environs, the work of art would not exist.

The sequence of passages, windows, portals and openings that constitute this final wing invites visitors to cross the threshold from reality to artwork, from residential design cues to emptied artistic space. It's an architecture of both liminal and luminescent effects. I think of Emily Dickinson's lines: 'One need not be a chamber to be haunted, one not need be a house; the brain has corridors, surpassing material place.'

¹Robert G. Cohn, 'Mallarme's Windows' in *Yale French Studies*, no. 54 (1977), pp. 23–31, cited in Rosalind Krauss, 'Grids', October, Vol. 9, (Summer 1979), p.59.