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## **Art in Context/Artist Lecture: Robert Irwin**

October 31, 1994  
30 minutes, 16 seconds

Interviewee: Robert Irwin

Transcribed by: Allura E. Hays

[inSite Archive](#)

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Time	Transcription
00:00	[inSite_Archive_94] [Art in Context/ Artist Lecture/ Robert Irwin]
00:08	[UCSD Extension in downtown San Diego/ October 31, 1994] [English/ 30 min.]
00:18	[Insite'94 with Robert Irwin] [TRT — 29:18] [10/31/94 — Cain]
00:34	[beeping 10 – 9 – 8 – 7 – 6 – 5 – 4 – 3 – 2]
00:45	[music] [inSITE94]
00:51	[with Robert Irwin]
00:59	Speaker 1: Please join me in welcoming Robert Irwin. [Clapping]
01:06	Robert Irwin: Let me just begin with a quote by Piet Mondrian. “Non-figurative art brings to an end the ancient culture of art. The culture of particular form is approaching its end. The culture of determined relations has begun. This consequence brings us, in a future perhaps remote, towards the end of art as a thing separated from our surrounding environment, which is the actual plastic reality, but this end is at the same time a new beginning. Art will not only continue, but will realize itself more and more. But first by the unification of architecture, sculpture, and painting, a new plastic reality will be created. Painting and sculpture will not manifest themselves as separate objects nor as mural art, which destroys architecture itself, nor as applied art but being purely constructive, will aid the creation of a surrounding, not merely utilitarian or rational, but also pure and complete in its beauty.”
02:10	Robert Irwin: Tha— that kind of prophetic statement made a long time ago. Just briefly, tha— as I— as I sort of understand it or interpret it, which is my prerogative, since I get to make the commitments accordingly. The history of modern art is proc— approximately now roughly, in terms of its really operative form, about 200 years old. Modern art, modern thought. They overlap. They're the same.
02:40	Robert Irwin: Essentially the first hundred years, was I think characterized best by what— is called a phenomenological reduction. That is, it started out with a very clearly, highly defined logic— pictorial logic— David say a [ <i>The Coronation of Napoleon</i> ] would be a perfect example of that. An incredible painting in a— in— in

a— with absolute correctness with regards to what kind of pictorial space, perspective, and so on and so forth.

- 03:13 Robert Irwin: And over a period of a hundred years, we end up at the far end of that with having to deal with— or to wrestle with someone like Malevich and all those people looking at a Malevich saying “my god, everything we know and love and hold dear, are gone, you know, thi— this is just— this is a desert.” And Malevich retorted “yes, but it’s a desert of pure feeling.” And what he’d be— and what he essentially put in place with that statement, was a— a new philosophic ground and a— and a sense a— a— a beginning explanation for that radical history.
- 03:51 Robert Irwin: That history has to be taken seriously. We may not agree with it and it has not yet played out, in terms of whether or not we— it’s consequences are to be taken seriously. It’s about half way through the process of innovation. That’s one of the mistakes people tend to make. We tend to think when we start talking about— we say, what is it or what does it mean, we assume that imme— that all things can essentially reveal themselves immediately.
- 04:21 Robert Irwin: You have to, in a sense, take into account the idea that all new ideas begin obscurely. That is, there is an act of discovery at some point. There has to be an act, somehow, of trying to assimilate that discovery. There becomes a dialog among colleagues that is people who are — share the same kind of interests, the same kind of curiosity. They may not meet each other, may not spend time together, but they are essentially sharing the same set of questions and the same potential, and the same moment in time.
- 04:53 Robert Irwin: Over a period of time, that activity will create a— a kind of a— a clarity about that discovery and may, in a sense, posit itself as a concept— conceptual ground,  $E = mc^2$  or I make a painting or something— essentially establish a sort of conceptual ground from which a whole process of development takes place. That is, an idea does not come into the world ad hoc or whole, it is— comes in over a long period of time and is very carefully developed.
- 05:25 Robert Irwin: The first level essentially is developing the— the principles or the grounds of that idea and developing the— the characteristics of that idea or the potential of that idea. Having done that over a period of time, that activity may then qualify for what I call art is art. That is, when a new idea comes into the world— a new possibility comes in the world— whether it’s an art or physics or any other discipline, one of the first things that has to be done, is that it has to be disciplined, and that is it’s disciplined by its comparison or its action or its relationship to an existing body of knowledge.
- 06:02 Robert Irwin: That is, there already is an art in place. There already is a history of art in place. There already is a history of physics. And a new idea doesn’t sort of

just wander around. It essentially challenges in some way or extends in some way, the existing concepts or the existing body of knowledge. And so there has to be a process, sometimes taking a good period of time, in which this idea is actually tested.

- 06:23 Robert Irwin: There is no reason whatsoever why should— we should abandon the— our— what we already know and what already works, for just a pretty idea or just because somebody suggests it so. So this process is a very complex one, and that process, having once been accomplished— and only then, the idea can possibly be posed as a social action. That is the idea that this thing would in fact: A, change the body of knowledge, change how we conceptually structure our minds, how we structure the world and in— and— and consequently change the physical world around us— begin to change how we order things, our concepts of— of— of— of a— of— how disciplines should operate, our concepts of— our institutions operate, and so on and so forth, and actually affect the social order.
- 07:12 Robert Irwin: That orderly process is really critical, if not, it could cause tremendous chaos and tremendous harm. And so an idea like modern thought is really, and I'll go into it further, is in about that stage in— in— in its development. The first hundred years, as I say, was a process of withdrawal from a deeply committed idea about reality. A deep— deeply committed idea about meaning and purpose. And, at the— about the time, say just to make this very brief— at the time of Malevich, he— as I said before, established a kind of— a philosophic ground for another kind of preceding, another kind of reality.
- 07:50 Robert Irwin: One thing that was very critical about this particular kind of thinking is that it was not anti or it was not an either/or proposition. One of the things critical about modern thought is it is a both/and or— or— its— it does not operate from a godhead, does not operate with the idea of a hierarchy of such, but rather deals with the possibility that more than one truth exists simultaneously.
- 08:15 Robert Irwin: And in Husserl's idea of a phenomenological re— reduction, what he proposed essentially was that if we really want to ask questions that are— le— let me just step back a sec— history, our actions are generally homogeneous. That is, we have a conceptual ground, a set of beliefs, and on those beliefs and on that ground, we build very elaborate structures and the structures really finally have the value of that initial conceptual ground.
- 08:45 Robert Irwin: If at some time in the operation of this, and as this thing becomes more elaborate, it also becomes more and more functional. And in many ways, more and more beautiful. And so this whole drive towards kind of conceptual structures, constantly refining itself, constantly sophisticating itself and our ability to practice is our ability to really— and one of the modes of education, is to put us on the cutting edge of that knowledge. And the more— and the more we are

conversant with it and the more we're on the cutting edge, the more functional we become and the more beautiful our activities can— can be.

- 09:17 Robert Irwin: It's interesting that in our society, all of our renaissances are at the period of the highest level of— of development, that is, the highest level of performance. Because, essentially, how we measure the quality of ideas, is not by measuring the idea itself, but rather by measuring the performance or the consequences of the idea. That is, we measure its— the kind of objective implications of the idea itself.
- 09:45 Robert Irwin: History is a measure— very careful culling of the consequences of the idea and maintaining, what we call, like a memory or the body of knowledge. And it's a very critical activity. That it does that very well. So this idea of measuring as such is— is— is— as we know it, from an objective point of view, and from a— a— a— a quantitative point of view, is the measuring of things which are just that, measurable.
- 10:10 Robert Irwin: And so you have, essentially, a renaissance which is at— this where— where the painting is at— its zenith. When actually we all know that— that such moments are really finally, in some ways, immediately tied or tethered to the quality of an idea or a question put in place at one time. That questions— set in motion a properly posited question— set in motion an inquiry which eventually results in these kinds of marvelous consequences— social consequences.
- 10:40 Robert Irwin: If you take that proposition away, one could say that— that the— that the renaissance or the— or the real critical moment, is the moment when we posit the question. That the properly posited question, which begets the answer, is sometimes maybe the most critical and the most difficult thing to do, especially given the way the mind constructs.
- 11:03 Robert Irwin: I would say, in this modern thought idea, that both are true— that it is the dialectic that Hegel talks about. That the answers, when they become refined and defined, they also, not only clearly define what they know or what they do, but they begin to clearly define what they don't do and what they don't know. And as it were set their own questions in motion.
- 11:26 Robert Irwin: So at a point in time, I th— the questions as such built up to— to a critical mass that forced art to go through this radical change. And that radical change is a very difficult thing for human beings to do. That is, what we're really— what we're talking about is— as I said before, a homogeneous change, is when we have our concepts and beliefs in place, and like rungs on a ladder, we've progressed and we have a good clear sense of progression and we understand the ground and we begin to understand the nature of the direction or what the aspirations are, and we can progress in a— in a orderly manner.

- 12:04 Robert Irwin: If someone in that kind of a situation— and very operative— should find a question that they could not answer, it's easy enough for you to say, "well I've not done my homework properly or somehow I'm not quite working it all out," and you can set the question aside.
- 12:21 Robert Irwin: But if you, after a while, accumulate three or four or five or six or eight or ten questions as a curious person, you might begin to wonder why these questions— they may begin to bother you as anomalies and make you a little nervous. So you may say— take the time to take this accumulation of questions, four, five, six, eight, or what— critical questions, and really in fact try and solve them. By using what you know, by essentially disciplining them through your— the— the existing logic and the ex— existing methodology that you have.
- 12:52 Robert Irwin: And if you should find that they are not amenable to that— that they cannot be answered by following those procedures, you have what is called an existential dilemma [Robert giggles]. That is everything in the world is still working and operative, the whole logic is still in place, Newtonian physics for example still works, but there are things that it doesn't answer.
- 13:12 Robert Irwin: There are dimensions to the nature of nature or the nature of matter that somehow do not reveal themselves from that kind of an approach. And so you probably have to do the one thing that Husserl suggested, which it's not an accident that in mid— in the mid nineteenth century, that Husserl should come up with such an idea as phe— the phenomenological reduction which was simply— if we begin in that kind of a dilemma, our problem is that we are completely encapsulated by this kind of thinking.
- 13:42 Robert Irwin: And if there is an anomaly or some other way of doing it, or some extension, we're in the wrong place to actually ask the question. And so, the whole history of reduction through the nineteenth century could be viewed as— individuals essentially going through the process very carefully of weighing and withdrawing themselves for the kinds of commitments that they have. Now that's a very precarious and rather dangerous thing to do, since as you move away from this, you also become less and less operative.
- 14:10 Robert Irwin: The other thing that makes it most critical is that from any outside point of view— that is, anyone not sharing your questions, this can only appear as a kind of anti-social act or sometimes, maybe nihilistic or somehow in some way, a negativism.
- 14:28 Robert Irwin: If you're asked "what are your alternatives", you certainly have no willin— no ability at this point to argue cause you don't have an alternative. All you're doing, in sense, is trying to find a place, as Husserl put it, to go kind of back to the beginning— the beginning in perception as an individual and reconsider how in fact things might be.

- 14:48 Robert Irwin: So having gone through this incredible process of withdrawal— which by the way is something— one way of looking at modern art, why else would it start out with something as beautiful as— as *The Coronation of Napoleon* and end up with something, which theoretically could be as nihilistic as Malevich. I mean too many generations, too many people from too many different backgrounds, from too many parts of the world participated in it for it to be, as some people feared, as a kind of joke or some kind of capricious activity on the part of artists.
- 15:18 Robert Irwin: I think it's much more reasonable to assume that there may in fact be some real issues at stake here. So if you look at that history up to that point, you could consider the possibility that, in fact, art was— and modern thought was returning to a ver— its basic ground in the world, which is human beings as perceptual beings, and to reexamine the possibility of how we might organize our thought.
- 15:43 Robert Irwin: I really— essentially, a whole new consciousness in a way. It's not an accident that a lot of the kind of social gyrations that— that ha— that swirled around Cubism and Dada and so on and so forth, had the look of a kind nihilistic thing because, you have to understand that, the people partic— participating in that did not at the moment have an answer but really, in a sense, were going through the final throes of a catharsis.
- 16:16 Robert Irwin: Now that's a very difficult thing to put your own beliefs up— up for examination. And one of the things that Husserl suggested, and one of the things that's really char— critical to modern thought, is that he suggested that these things were not in themselves wrong, it's just that they did not encompass all the possibilities. So rather than throw them out, rather than negate them, rather than— to attack them— which by the way some people did in the process, in the social milieu but I think mistakenly what he suggested is that we bracket them out.
- 16:46 Robert Irwin: That we simply try for the moment— which is a very difficult thing to do— but to set them aside. The classic example I think is that Newtonian physics— is not negated by Einsteinian physics, it still works. Everything about it still works. All of its principles are still, in fact, absolutely operative. The only really critical difference is that wa— at one time, Newtonian physics constituted the total frame of mind.
- 17:12 Robert Irwin: And what happened with the in— introduction of Einsteinian physics is another way of looking which revealed that the world or that matter or that the nature of being and so on, were more complicated than we once thought.
- 17:24 Robert Irwin: Having had that possibility, it's certainly possible to consider that it in fact could be even more complex than that. That we may go through another step or another catharsis. Now that kind of very fundamental thinking, when it happens

in any society, does not happen isolated in any one discipline. You're talking about something as— as fundamental as just the simple nature of consciousness, i.e. how do I organize the world, how do I view and understand the world, and how do I make sense out of what I incense— what I sense.

- 17:54 Robert Irwin: And so that all disciplines— the world's not that out of balance. If I am thinking it in one discipline and I look around and it's not going on in some other, I better recheck my thinking. This is not something unique to me or unique to any one person or any one segment of the society. These ideas essentially are— permeate through the society as a whole.
- 18:15 Robert Irwin: Mondrian could be considered someone who supplied the conceptual ground. All of you are probably familiar with Mondrian, and the history of Mondrian, where he starts out with a clear drawing of a beautiful drawi— he was a great draftsman— a beautiful drawing of a flower and slowly transforms it into another kind of reality.
- 18:32 Robert Irwin: A— which he begins to replace its pictorialness with its physicality, its— its energy, its existence, its presence there— in— in front of you, directly in your— in your sensorys— in your sensory field. So he went very carefully and Mondrian is a classic example and— and— a good piece of education because it's done without a single step mov— missing. Every single step is there.
- 18:58 Robert Irwin: I had [been] very fortunate as a young artist to see— an exhibition of Mondrian in New York that occupied two museums and three galleries, so that the full range was there, and had the chance to see it and suddenly it was not some kind of mysterious fun and games, but suddenly every single beautifully logically laid out the transference from one kind of understanding to another kind of understanding.
- 19:26 Robert Irwin: Having established that conceptual ground, my view of the— of the history of— of art past that point— there are other things and I am not going through history and the— the— the critical c— contributions made by analytical cubism and by Dada and so on and so forth, these are all pieces and parts, I am just saying philosophic ground, conceptual ground, and what I think the abstract expressionists— which is where I cut my teeth and came into the world as an artist— what they essentially contributed was a new visual vocabulary.
- 19:58 Robert Irwin: They essentially grounded a new kind of seeing and organized how and in what that— way that scene works. You take— on one end, you have Jackson Pollock with his wiles and— and kind of seemingly overall field and craziness— on a certain level. And you at the other end have Ad Reinhardt and what you have, is this incredible range of examining the whole range of pictorial perception.



- 20:27 Robert Irwin: But also they set in place a— an issue which became even more critical, which was, the idea that perception, being critical to it, that painting and that sculpture were, in fact, finally revealed as something other than what we had— we've come to assume they are. They were revealed as tools, as methodology. I mean, when something is as successful as painting or sculpture, for as long as it's been, one, after a while, begins to think that that in fact is— is what art is. That art is somehow tied to these methods or to these tools.
- 21:03 Robert Irwin: And this is not a negation or a value judgement but finally, if you look at just even the history of art among painters and among art— sculptors, every generation has essentially reinvented the medium. Every generation has had to reinvent the method with which— or the process by which they developed even their sculpture or their painting as such. One of the interesting things about looking at that history is that it has not stopped. It has continued to change and continuously change.
- 21:31 Robert Irwin: So one of the things that, in my mind presents, is that each of these arts is art, but none of them is art per se. That is, each of the arts was a perfect representation of its moment in time and, I think, acquires that— that whatever you want to call it— that moment of art. But at the same time, none of them consume the subject. That the pure subject of art still exists and every new generation has to begin readdressing that potential.
- 22:01 Robert Irwin: I will suggest that that pure subject of art, i.e. what art contributes in the overall process that's unique to it— is a continuous examination of the human beings per— ability or— yeah, ability to perceive the world. That is, probably, as we move through the world we only see a small amount of and really only think and organize, a small amount of what is available to us. That artists have always, continuously, reexamined that and represented, and redefined, and re-sophisticated how and what way we see the world.
- 22:39 Robert Irwin: That finally at root, this idea— perception with an aesthetic bias has essentially been the fundamental role of artists all— art all along. In the same sense that physics continually examines that idea of just the nature of matter, or the nature of energy, or the nature of— of nature as such. That art has a subject and that that is fundamental to it. As the process develops itself into some kind of social action, it also acquires all the other things that we know about it.
- 23:09 Robert Irwin: Making this history a little bit short, just a real simple des— de— demonstration of one of the consequences for sculptors or]— and what you can apply this— it actually applies more easily to painters but— because for a while when painting for my— for example myself I painted a painting that didn't begin and end at the edge and found my sudden— myself suddenly not being a painter. Finally at the moment where I had acquired the ability to be a painter, was a very shocking moment for me.

- 23:38 Robert Irwin: Suddenly that thing which I became reasonably good at and which I believed in totally, suddenly disappeared as a possibility for me. For a moment, I thought, "well it was just a dimensional problem," and that I could solve it by becoming a sculptor. That is, move from two-dimensional to three-dimensional. And having spent a little time there, I realized that the same thing applied cause we're talking about something that is very fundamental. How did the painting ever isolate itself in the first— first place?
- 24:03 Robert Irwin: That is, when I look at the world, there are no frames. I don't see a frame around things. I see the world as a continuously knit, constantly interactive set of relationships. As Malevich put it, a world of— of— of constant relations. How did we ever get this idea that we could do and an— essentially establish, or table, our entire dialog about seeing, within a frame?
- 24:31 Robert Irwin: It's a highly stylized learn logic and it, in fact, does work. And it really is related to the process of intellection. Intellection is really the process of continuing— looking at a mass of possibilities, drowning in it— to be able to select and elect those things which are critical to whatever action we're involved in. So we elect, we focus essentially— and really a frame, is a project, is essentially an extension of the concept of focus. To intellect, to bring out, to bring into view, to focus, and therefore, to isolate that which is meaningful. And by being able to do that, we can then put a frame around it.
- 25:06 Robert Irwin: In sculpture— in the three-dimensionalness of sculpture— the process was that I take this object that I'm making and the name of the game is [water pouring] I fill it up with content. And the more content [water pouring] and the more meaning I can get, the more ob— the more the object essentially rises up in a value structure, in a meaning structure. And if I can, as it were [water pouring] give it enough meaning, enough person— enough— excuse me, enough— I said it enough meaning, that object then begins to operate in the vacuum of that meaning.
- 25:44 Robert Irwin: That is this— this object now, on the basis of its meaning, develops the ability to become by degrees transcendent. If this object has, as Plato would put it, essence, something which is so essentially human, so absolutely critical true, then it should be true always and everywhere. And we develop the possibility of portableness, that is, I can make an object in my studio [paper rustling] and I aspire to this object having this kind of essence or this absoluteness in a way— great beauty, great meaning, what have you— and I can take it from my studio and to a gallery in New York and nothing really of consequence has changed because it essentially exists within the vacuum of its meaning. The fact that the room is a different color or that it's a different shape, is of no great consequence. Because its meaning is so great in comparison, that these things become

meaningless, which is how the painting is able to isolate itself from the frame, and the frame from the wall, and so on and so forth.

- 26:43 Robert Irwin: So it's a beautiful idea. It really works and it's a nice aspiration, this idea of aspiring to a transcendent truth or a transcendent understanding or transcendent being, Plato's thing of essence, essentially. It's a marvelous idea and I— I don't fault it in any way, this is not a faulting of it but, in terms of how I live in the world, I'm not sure that I shall ever acquire any of those things.
- 27:04 Robert Irwin: So what maybe I live in is a set of conditions and a conditional world in which I do not— I may aspire to— to— to knowing the— the— the order of the universe or if there is a God in the heaven but it's a slightly different proposition to assume or to operate as if I think I know what that is. One is a process of inquiry, the other moves into a system of understanding.
- 27:27 Robert Irwin: So this thing, in a sense allows us to do some rather beautiful things though. And it underwrites some really beautiful kinds of logics, and I can, as an artist, practice within my studio and invest this thing with a continuously— you know continuously highly soph— sophisticated meaning and I could maybe even aspire to move it all the way to New York.
- 27:47 Robert Irwin: The first time I took the work to New York and they hated it and— and hated it for reasons which were beautifully— articulated. I mean their logic and understanding was extremely good, it was astounding. The only one problem it didn't have anything to do with what I was interested in. [audience laughter]
- 28:02 Robert Irwin: And suddenly for the first time I thought, my god— and also I ran into problems that the work that I was doing didn't fit into a gallery and somehow was not usable in any— any kind of commerce. But all of a sudden, I began to realize that the thing I'm making has consequences. By the changes in its dimensions, by the changes in the physicality— by my changes in terms of how I understand it and how I assumed that it existed in the world— it begin to challenge those institutions in the world.
- 28:30 Robert Irwin: And for the first time I understood the kind of social consequences of something that is from the bottom up. Something that is essentially from my own psyche, rather than administered down from the top. A lot of times when we think about revolution, we think, in a sense, about revolution being those kind of social actions where we are challenged and as it were, assault those institutions because of their incorrectness.
- 28:54 Robert Irwin: What I began to understand, with that trip to New York was, that I had changed, and the work had changed, and by that it had begun to challenge these things. Now that didn't necessarily make it right. Certainly by the fact that I was feeling left-footed in the world, meant I probably better go home and take a

second look since if I am the only one— or at the moment seemingly the only one doing it, I maybe have the problem, not them.

29:16 Robert Irwin: One of the things about that kind of change, which is very difficult, is that there is no proof at the moment when you do it. And we don't know what the consequences are. So, the only ground that you really have, to operate from, is the quality of your questions. That is, if you go back, like with Husserl, and you recheck your questions and they still hold water, you may be stuck with them, unless you want to just sort of pretend they don't exist.

29:45 [music]  
[This has been a production of UCSD-TV, in conjunction with the Installation Gallery and Insite '94.]

29:55 [music continues]  
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