

Looking for the Dark Side of Doug Wheeler's Luminous "Infinity Environment"

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Doug Wheeler's "SA MI 75 DZ NY 12," 1975/2012

(Photo by Tim Nighswander/IMAGING4ART, courtesy of David Zwirner, New York © 2012 Doug Wheeler)

Doug Wheeler's current installation at David Zwirner gallery is amazingly good. Almost too amazing and too good for this world.

Wheeler is one of the original cadre of artists who fomented California's now-classic Light and Space movement, alongside better-known figures like Robert Irwin and [James Turrell](#). The Zwirner project, cryptically titled "SA MI 75 DZ NY 12" (2012), is one of his rare and absorbing "infinity environments." It is both [reportedly](#) the most expensive project ever realized by the gallery and almost certainly one of the most popular. The interest from the press and public has been incredible, with people lining up to get a peek. Yet this installation also manages to live up to the hype, presenting the viewer with an experience that is at once rejuvenating and revelatory.

The idea is simple, even if the attention to detail required to realize it is breathtaking. You enter a chamber that has been painted all white. The room's walls, floor, and

ceiling have been curved together so that your eyes are denied the obvious reference points of their joints. An ingenious lighting rig produces an all-around ambient light, preventing obvious shadows that might orient you. As a consequence, within the atmosphere of Wheeler's "infinity environment," your eyes are unable to determine how far or how near you are to the edge of the space. You see only a placeless white mist, both intimate and vast. Perceptually, it is like floating in space.

Over the course of a half hour in Wheeler's room, the lights gradually shift, becoming more intense and then fading back again into a kind of twilight, before starting the cycle again. In the twilight period, there are moments when space seems to take on a pinkish hue, or the air seems to become a crepuscular violet as you pass through the threshold between light and shade. Staring into the nothingness, your eyes eventually begin to play tricks on you as they strain for a reference point. I began, at a certain point, to see something like dandelion seeds pulsing through my field of vision, and had to rest my eyes on something solid to dispel them.

If Wheeler is less famous than Turrell or Irwin, this is in part because he has been so exacting and consequently so difficult to work with. He is reputed to have turned down museum shows because he thought they couldn't meet his standards. This temperament is in fact not a mere tic, but inseparable from the nature of the work itself. Wheeler couldn't help but be almost impossibly difficult, since he demands something almost impossible from his materials, which is that they be not there. Truly achieving the placeless effect that Wheeler desired would require some alien cosmic substance, star stuff that was unsullied by earthly physical limitations (and indeed, within "SA MI 75 DZ NY 12" it is always a relief to spot some small scuff or imperfection on the wall that reminds you that you are in real space.)

As with some of Turrell's walk-in installations, you enter "SA MI 75 DZ NY 12" only after putting on hospital-style white booties over your feet, so that you will leave no mark. To me this is symbolic of the fact that you are meant to be completely present in the "infinity environment" and also somehow not there. When Wheeler [speaks](#) of what he hopes to achieve, it is about more than experiencing the light or space of an actual place. He's reaching for something both more intimate and more abstract: He wants you to experience yourself experiencing light and space. (Ken Johnson [is quite right](#), I think, to relate the Wheeler experience to the "transcendental aesthetic" of Immanuel Kant, for whom space and time were actually mental categories.)

And yet it has to be said that the whole thing does not totally break free of the earth. A concrete terrestrial reference point creeps back into the mix. The light raises and lowers on the half-hour cycle, and is clearly meant to echo the experience of watching the light change in the atmosphere. Wheeler himself [relates](#) the experience of his work to living in the Arizona desert. Its attempt to void its own material support is of a piece with a kind of voiding of civilization, thrusting you into the position of someone alone with their experiences in the wilderness.

That's the long way around to say that despite the Zwirner installation's quite sumptuous sensory pleasure and preternatural accessibility, what it demands is also almost anti-social in the way that it places you at the frontier of human experience. Indeed, a funny side effect of seeing an "infinity environment" in crowded New York is that it unexpectedly makes you sympathize with Wheeler's misanthropy, since every time another person wanders into your field of vision it brings you back to physical reality and out of the experience. "Get out of my way," you want to say, "and leave me alone with the light!"

Doug Wheeler's "SA MI 75 DZ NY 12" is on view at [David Zwirner Gallery](#) on 519 West 19th Street through February 25, 2012.