

Beyond James Turrell: 10 More Great Artists Who Use Light as a Medium

By Reid Singer on Jun 18, 2013 3:30pm

I don't remember the last time I was as excited by a museum show as I am about James Turrell's, which opens in at the Guggenheim Museum in New York next week. At least as an art appreciator, Turrell has been like a grandfather to me. Before I encountered his work for the first time, I didn't really know what installation art was, and even though I admired the way some artists negotiated the phenomenon of light, it had not occurred to me that *light art* — more specifically, art that buttressed and captured light, often for its own sake, in a grandly hypnotizing way — could be someone's life's work.

Since that first encounter (which took place, not inappropriately, at a museum in rural California), I've learned that actually, lots of artists speak Turrell's language. Here are a few.



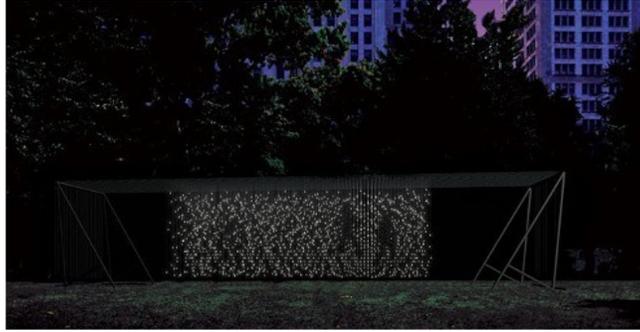
Bill Culbert, Strait, 2013. Photo by Jennifer French.

[Image via [Artdaily](#)]

Bill Culbert

The intangibility of light has been a special point of attention for Bill Culbert, who also integrates suitcases, furniture, and repurposed plastic

containers into his work. The above installation, *Strait*, was part of Culbert's contribution to this year's Venice Biennale.

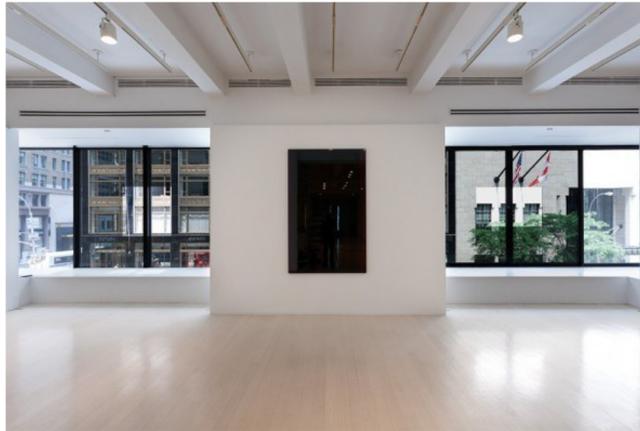


Jim Campbell, *Scattered Light*, 2010.

[Image via [The L Magazine](#)]

Jim Campbell

People hanging out in New York's Flatiron district in 2010 might remember Jim Campbell's installation *Scattered Light*. From two A-posts in Madison Square Park, Campbell hung a net of 2,000 LEDs that turned on or off when visitors walked by. The result was a set of ghostly, moving silhouettes taken from a hundred feet away.



Robert Irwin, Installation view of *Doting the i's and crossing the t's: part I*, 2012.

[Image via [Gallerist](#)]

Robert Irwin

Although he started out as an Abstract Expressionist painter, Irwin's later works took on a much more technologically edgy approach. The installation *Doting the i's and crossing the t's* was characteristically ungrounded, consisting of three 16-foot-tall transparent acrylic columns that disappear under a particular set of lighting conditions.



Rafael Lozano-Hemmer, *Pulse Room*, 2006.

[Image via [ArtNews](#)]

Rafael Lozano-Hemmer

Taking part in the wave of participatory work in recent art, Rafael Lozano-Hemmer uses robotics, LED screens, and film projections to disturb the uniform conditions in which people interact in groups. For the above *Pulse Room*, Lozano-Hemmer built an array of incandescent light bulbs that flashed at the exact rate of a participant's heart when he or she held an interface placed on a side of the room.



Angela Bulloch, *Night Sky: Mercury & Venus*, 2010. Installation view.

[Image via [Art Agenda](#)]

Angela Bulloch

A former collaborator of Liam Gillick's, Angela Bulloch has engaged the spiritual potential of light art works in installations like *Night Sky: Mercury & Venus*, her installation in the Münster Cathedral.

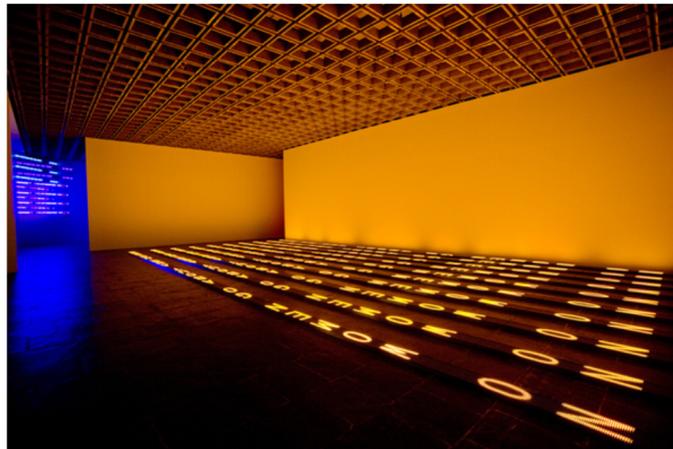


Olafur Eliasson, Your rainbow panorama,2006–2011.

[Image via OlafurEliasson.net]

Olafur Eliasson

Although a lot of high-concept light work involves the outdoors, it would be a mistake to describe the genre as exclusively rural. The above installation, at the ARoS Aarhus Kunstmuseum in Aarhus, Denmark, could be seen for miles, and its emphatically synthetic color scheme complemented the city streets beautifully.



Installation view of Jenny Holzer: PROTECT PROTECT. Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, 2009. Photograph by Bill Orcutt.

[Image via Whitney.org]

Jenny Holzer

The flip side of light art installations that seem ethereal and light are works in light and text, in which artists like Jenny Holzer bring the otherwise “floating words” of political speech down to ground level. For

PROTECT PROTECT, Holzer repurposed source material from declassified pages from U.S. government documents to endow the words with new meaning.



Keith Sonnier, *Sphinx Position I*, 1988. 84" by 108" by 55". Neon/aluminum.

[Image via [Mary Boone Gallery](#)]

Keith Sonnier

Still other light installation artists can use visibly grounded materials like Holzer's while still maintaining a sense of lightness. For *Sphinx Position I*, Keith Sonnier used stand-alone neon tubes and aluminum casing to render a simultaneously heavy, industrial, and playful effect.



Gunda Foerster, *TUNNEL*, Permanent work at Berlin Deutscher Bundestag since 2012.

[Image via [GundaFoerster.de](#)]

Gunda Foerster

Distinguishing herself from the touchy, humanistic tone of Post-Minimalist light art experimenters is Gunda Foerster, who has been building installations with tubular light bulbs since the mid-1990s. Her work *TUNNEL*, above, emphasizes the more alien qualities of florescent light bulbs, their straightness, their neon coloring, and their typical right-angled arrangements.



Ben Rubin, installation shot from *Vectors*, 2011.

[Image via [Art in America](#)]

Ben Rubin

With his hands in sound art and net-sourced “data art,” Ben Rubin might be better described as a media experimenter than a pure light artist. Several skill sets were put to use, for example, in his exhibition *Vectors*, which used vacuum-fluorescent bulbs to display pieces of text, in real-time, from online chat rooms (the conversations were also simultaneously spoken or sung by a voice synthesizer). For other works, Rubin has used fragments of disconnected Wikileaks phrases, which were struck into sheets of paper by a mechanized Underwood typewriter.