A Work within a Work: On Robert Irwin’s "Excursus: Homage to the Square3" at Dia Beacon

Early in the summer of 2015, Robert Irwin returned to Dia:Beacon to erect an installation he has created in 1998, in a location where he himself designed both the building and its surroundings. However, the new reincarnation of his installation, Excursus, reveals more than Irwin’s long history of visual exploration.

Review / Rotem Rozental October 5, 2015

With tears in his eyes, Robert Irwin reflects on his first visits to Beacon, upon the invitation of the Dia Art Foundation in 2003 to convert a derelict Nabisco Printing Facility into a museum. The town was so different than it is today, he told the audience at a talk given earlier this summer in the galleries he re-designed. He hadn’t been back for years. Now, on the occasion of the opening of the installation Excursus: Homage to the Square3, Irwin returned to share past experiences with Director Jessica Morgan and dozens of listeners, who, much to their surprise, were swept by Irwin’s emotional stroll down memory lane. They too were moved as the artist remembered how he found the trees planted in the garden, how the growers warned him these will not survive; how Main St., now affluent with cafes, restaurants and galleries, was bleak and almost deserted; how the board of trustees frowned upon the idea that an artist, rather than an architect, will design their new space outside of New York City, and how he envisioned the road to Dia: Beacon as a journey that begins not at the entrance door to the museum, but at Grand Central, on the track that leads travelers through the Hudson River into town.

Robert Irwing talk at the Dia

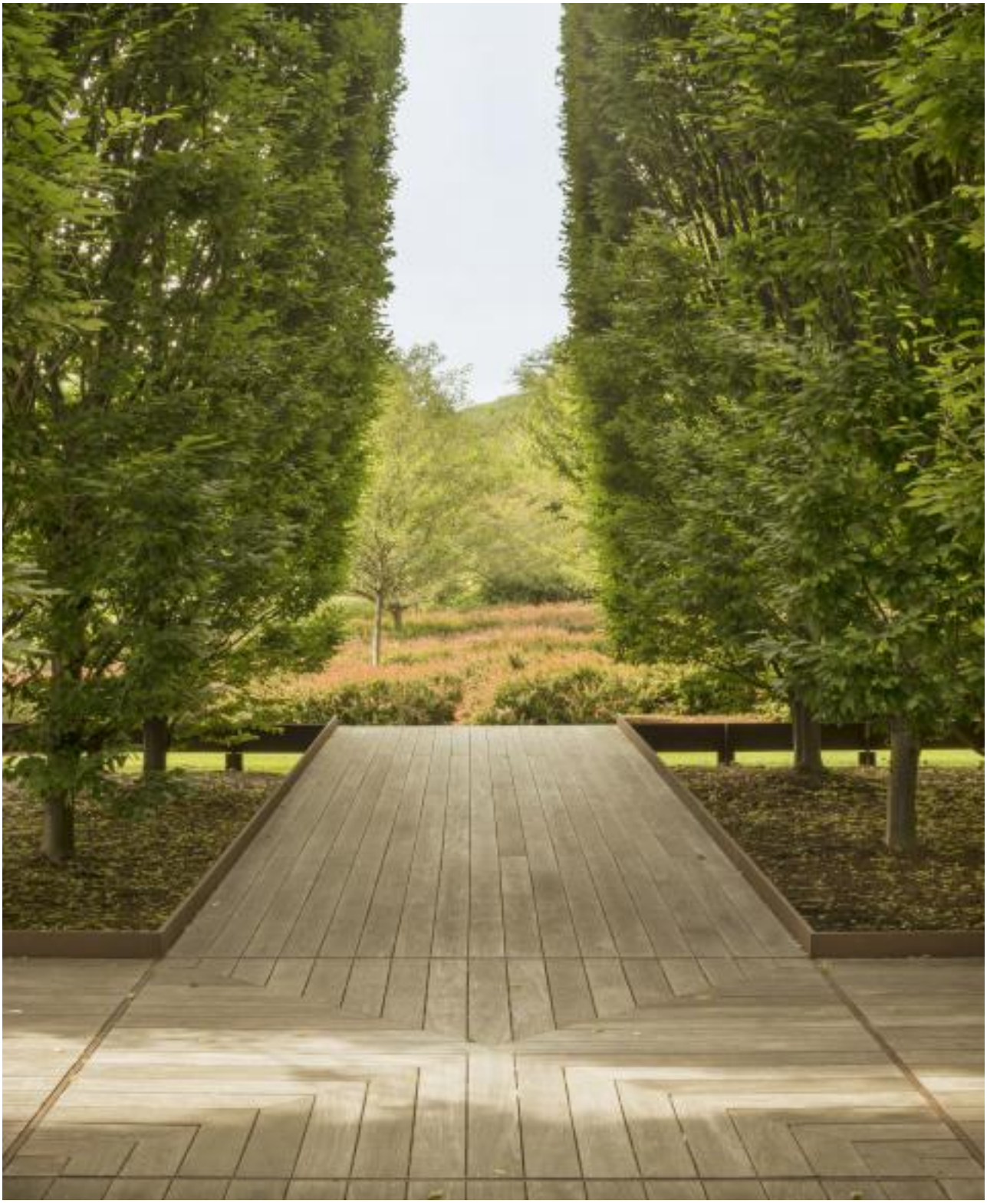
[1]Talk at the Dia
Photograph Rotem Rozental

Established in 1974, The Dia Foundation set out to help artists realize projects that could not fit within the confines of traditional museums. Working with artists such as Donald Judd, Dan Flavin and Richard Serra, the foundation was involved in many projects that came to define land art, minimalism and other artistic experiments with viewership and space. At the beginning of the new millennium, it became clear they needed an exhibition space outside of their Chelsea location to present their collection, one that will be designated for a prolonged dwelling with the artworks.

Enter Robert Irwin, an accomplished American installation artist, whose projects, much like Dia itself, challenge institutional boundaries. Many eyebrows were raised when Dia directors selected Irwin, who had no architectural experience, to design their newly chosen space at the town of Beacon. Only a few short years earlier he raised the same kind of controversy when he was selected to design the central garden of the Getty Museum [2] prior to its opening in 1997, even though he had no

experience in gardening. For Irwin, the garden at the Getty was an arena for experimenting with the unknown, in which nature’s arbitrary surprises determined the end-result.

מראה חוץ, דיה:ביקון, גלריות ריג'ו, ביקון, ניו יורק. צילום: סטודיו ביל ג'ייקובסון. באדיבות קרן דיה לאמנות **[3]**



[4]Exterior view, Dia:Beacon, Riggio Galleries, Beacon, New York.
Photo: Bill Jacobson Studio, New York. Courtesy Dia Art Foundation, New York

Irwin’s own practice seems to reflect the slow pace of flora’s growth. In 2002, he remarked about the gardens: “Sometimes the thing I discover -- a particular sense or feeling -- doesn’t actively come into play for years. Sometimes it turns up in the guise of a first instinct to be further explored. The best is when you really surprise yourself, when what you discover resonates in its place and is better than anything you could have ever conceived of.”1. In Beacon too, any surprises along the way resulted from his instinctual decision to maintain the original features of the printing facility, while erecting a garden that will speak the characteristics of the area in which it is situated - the Hudson Valley.

מראה חוץ, דיה:ביקון, גלריות ריג'ו, ביקון, ניו יורק. צילום: סטודיו ביל ג'ייקובסון. באדיבות קרן דיה לאמנות **[5]**

[6]Exterior view, Dia:Beacon, Riggio Galleries, Beacon, New York.

Photo: Bill Jacobson Studio, New York. Courtesy Dia Art Foundation, New York

מראה חוץ (גן מערבי), דיה:ביקון, גלריות ריג'ו, ביקון, ניו יורק. צילום: קן גבל. באדיבות קרן דיה לאמנות **[7]**

[8]Exterior view (West Garden), Dia:Beacon, Riggio Galleries,Beacon, New York.
Photo: Ken Goebel. Courtesy Dia Art Foundation, New York

Wearing a baseball cap, casual clothing and dark glasses, sitting under the windows he designed, with only four rectangles transparent and open to the outside world in every window pane, Irwin looked more like a passionate tourist than a renowned artist, whose experiments with light, space, landscape and perception came to define conditional art, which considers the artwork to be a non-hierarchical space, with no beginning nor end. "This is the first time I repeat a project,” He mentioned apologetically, referring to his new installation, “I am still not sure this was a good idea." Irwin, of course, was being overtly modest. He had famously taken over parks, rooftops, galleries, museums and ridges across The United States. In that sense, Irwin’s return to Dia might be seen as a work within a work, in which Excursus reverberates the installment of the garden as a hideaway for visitors, where they can gaze at the Hudson or immerse in Louise Lawler’s sound installation, as well as the delicate tracing of the space’s industrial past, and the play between artificial and natural light in the galleries. All of these features accumulate into a contemplation on the functionality and aesthetic qualities of museum spaces, the expanded perception of space and its visual potentialities

being a major characteristic of Irwin’s work in recent decades.

During the 1970s, Irwin abandoned his painting studio in favor of indoor and outdoor site-specific installations. Upon a trip to Amsterdam, he came across scrim, a fabric with translucent qualities, used in Holland for decorative purposes. This became the source material for his installations at The Whitney [9], Pace Gallery [10], and, much later, at Dia Chelsea. Pursuing the geometric relations of space and shape for over 25 years now, Excursus marked the first time he experimented with scrim, natural light, and fluorescent light. Influenced by painter Josef Albers and his ongoing color explorations, the first installment of Excursus in 1998 consisted of a space divided by scrim into 18 small rectangular rooms, each marked by fluorescent bulbs covered in gels in different colors, each divided into separate hues.

Excursus: Homage to the Square3 at Dia Beacon **[11]**

[12]Excursus: Homage to the Square3 at Dia Beacon
Photograph Rotem Rozental

The 2015 reincarnation of Excursus, however, reveals more than Irwin's private history of visual exploration. With its multiple ways in and out, its plays on light as texture and space as material, the installation emphasizes a crucial theme in Irwin's work and in Dia's Beacon location: the absence of a predetermined outcome -- or, in the artist's words, the power of surprise -- as key to the viewer's experience. The space Irwin outlined examines the ability of a line to dissect a space into infinity, where the presence of the viewer is required to complete the work. As the body is choreographed through the dissected spaces, seeing and being seen, the action becomes part of the experience. "There is no rationale," Irwin explains, "no intellectual justification for a route. At any point, you can walk in three or four different directions." While there are seemingly endless possibilities to wander through this work within a work, the sense of boundless repetitive movement is nonetheless endlessly new. This most recent phase in Irwin's continuous homage to shapes and lines challenges the confines of rigid architectural structures, even those the artist himself had created in a small town on the Hudson.

- 1. Cited in Lawrence Weschler, Robert Irwin Getty Garden (Los Angeles: The J. Paul Getty Museum, 2002).

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[9] http://whitney.org/Exhibitions/RobertIrwin
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