

Laruelle and Art

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In the early 1990s François Laruelle wrote an essay on James Turrell, the American artist known for his use of light and space.¹ While it briefly mentions Turrell's *Roden Crater* and is cognizant of his other work, the essay focuses on a series of twenty aquatint etchings made by Turrell called *First Light* (1989–1990). Designed to stand alone as prints, *First Light* nevertheless acts as a kind of backward glance revisiting and meditating on earlier corner light projections made by Turrell in the late 1960s, in particular works like *Afrum-Pronto* (1967).

For the exhibition of *First Light* at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1990, “the aquatints [were] arranged in groups based on the white shape that hovers in the dense black field of each print. In the installation, with light projected onto the images, the shapes appear to glow and float; viewed in sequence, they seem to move. The effect, from print to print, is tracelike and mesmerizing.”²

“I am dealing with no object,” Turrell said in a lecture a few years after producing *First Light*. “I am dealing with no image, because I want to avoid associative, symbolic thought... I am dealing with no focus or particular place to look. With no object, no image and no focus, what are you looking at?”³ Indeed the object of *First Light* is perception itself, as Turrell was the first to admit.

No object, no image, no focus—no wonder Laruelle was drawn to *First Light*. It represents the very core principles of the non-standard method. For Laruelle, Turrell's art work poses a basic problem. “Light makes manifest,” he acknowledges. “But what will manifest the light?”⁴ Systems of representation reveal aspects of the world to perceiving subjects; this is how light makes manifest. But is it possible to see light *in* itself, not in relation to a perceived object? Is it possible to manifest the rigorously immanent genericness of light itself?

Laruelle's essay on Turrell makes two essential claims, one about perception and the other about light. Regarding the former, Laruelle asserts that we must *think* perception not think

1. François Laruelle, “A Light Odyssey: La découverte de la lumière comme problème théorique et esthétique” (Poitiers: le Confort Moderne, 1991), 1, this and other unattributed translations are my own. I thank Miguel Abreu for bringing this essay to my attention.

2. “First Light: Twenty Etchings by James Turrell,” Museum of Modern Art (New York), July 1990.

3. Quoted in Amanda Boetzkes, *The Ethics of Earth Art* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 119.

about perception. Regarding the latter, Laruelle wishes to discover the *non-orientable* nature of light. As he admits, there is a light of orientation, a philosophical light. But there is also a light that does not seek to orient perception along a particular set of lines. It is this second kind of orientation that Laruelle seeks and that he sees evident in the work of Turrell. (Taking advantage of a play on words, Laruelle sometimes labels this kind of non-standard orientation “occidental” to differentiate it from what he sees as the endless orientalism of philosophy.)

Laruelle explores these two essential claims by way of three different themes stemming from Turrell's work: discovery, experimentation, and identity. Just as Deleuze did in his book on Francis Bacon, Laruelle assumes from the outset that Turrell and his art are performing theoretical work as such. Laruelle's is not a theoretical interpretation of a non-theoretical art work; the work itself is enacting the non-standard method. Turrell “has discovered a new aesthetic (and theoretical) object: light as such, the being-light of light.”⁵ Thus in Laruelle's view, Turrell himself discovered a non-phenomenological solution to the problem of light.

In an attempt to describe what he means by discovery, Laruelle draws attention to the subtle differences in meaning embedded in Turrell's title. “Turrell's title 'First Light' is ambiguous and can be interpreted in two ways. In the weakest sense it means just what it means, *first light*, the first among many, its own relative position in a continuous order in which it is included. In the strong sense it means *light first*, all the light given at once, without residual or supplement, without division or 'plays-of-light.’”⁶

This second sense, the strong sense, is most appealing to Laruelle, for it indicates the identity of light as a kind of first givenness, light as raw discovery or invention without supplement. Part of Laruelle's aim is to move away from the conventional way in which light appears in philosophical discourse, for example in phenomenology, which tends to think of light through a process of withdrawing and revealing. Laruelle's light is thus not white but black, absolutely black. “The black immanence of this light [...] lets it escape from all phenomenology stemming from the greco-philosophical type.”⁷

In order to describe the radical nature of Turrell's non-standard art, Laruelle poses a hypothetical scenario:

Imagine a photographer tired of using light to fix his "subject" or whatever other objects were before him. Imagine that this photographer was crazy enough to want to fix *the light as light*. If so, this would not be the light from distant stars, but a *light without stars, without source* no matter how distant or hidden, a light inaccessible to the camera. Should the photographer abandon his technique

4. Laruelle, “A Light Odyssey,” 1.

5. Ibid.

6. Ibid., 6.

7. Ibid., 8. On the topic of phenomenological revealing, Laruelle also notes that “when a subject is in a 'Turrellian' mode, its affect does not allow for a light that would be hidden and/or unveiled” (9). The key issue for Laruelle is that philosophy prohibits any kind of direct thought in light, in favor of reflections *on* light. “Light is the medium most favored by philosophy, and so philosophy—by way of ontology and phenomenology—must be understood as love of light more than light itself, just as philosophy is love of wisdom more than wisdom itself” (5).

and find another? Or should he generalize his technique across the various forms of the darkroom, the white cube, and the *camera obscura* in order to proliferate the angles, the frames, the perspectives, the openings and shutters used to capture (or perhaps to seduce) the light itself? Would he not be making, in essence, the kind of work that Turrell makes?⁸

Turrell's light is a light that doesn't come from the stars. Laruelle gives it an unusual label; he calls it a photic materiality.

Being both non-cosmic and non-ontological, Turrell's light does not orient the viewer. Instead, according to Laruelle, Turrell's light performs experiments on perception and retrains it according to alternative logics. This mode of experimentation produces what he calls an aesthetic generalization of perception in order to unilateralize the conventional prohibitions placed on perception by philosophy. Instead of philosophy or photography setting the agenda, "light acts instead...like a drive that has its own 'subjectivity,' or like an *a priori* force."⁹ Turrell's experimental mandate, therefore, is to allow both the artist and the viewer to test perception, not to probe the limits of perception, not to mimic the way in which perception is normalized by philosophy, not to think about perception, but to think *according to* perception.

In this sense the artist and the viewer are *strictly identical*, allowing for an auto-testing of perception. It is not that one party—be it artist, viewer, or critic—is in a privileged position to arbitrate Turrell's aesthetic experiment. Instead, all parties are identical.

This brings us to the final theme in the essay, identity. The key question for Laruelle is how to see light itself, light's *identity*. For Laruelle the only way to answer the question is to break the vicious cycle of worldly self-manifestation. "There is a paradox at the heart of aesthetic sentiment," Laruelle remarks. "The paradox is the following: on the one hand light remains to a certain degree in itself. It does not lose its identity in an object [...] but on the other hand, light 'radiates.'"¹⁰ There is no solution to the paradox, of course, since it belongs to the basic generative paradox fueling all of philosophy. Nevertheless the paradox provides Laruelle with raw material for non-standard intervention. Simply unilateralize the paradox and put both light and its radiation into immanent superposition. Such a move defangs the transcendental tendencies added to light by philosophy and reveals a purely immanent light.

Given the unusual and somewhat counter-intuitive nature of the non-standard universe, Laruelle is forced to speak in circumlocutions: light is a radiation-without-rays, or light is a reflecting-without-reflection. This might sound like jargon, yet Laruelle's "without" structures are necessary in order to designate the superimposition or unilateralization of the rivenness of the world. They aim to show "light discovered in its radical identity."¹¹

8. Ibid., 10.

9. Ibid., 14.

10. Ibid., 20. To be clear, Laruelle uses the term identity to mean something very particular, immanent sameness. His use of the term should not be confused with the way identity is used in discourses on identity politics or postmodern subject formation, particularly since these discourses typically use identity as a way to examine difference not sameness.

11. Ibid., 5.

Yet even with this brief gloss of Laruelle's Turrell essay, Laruelle's aesthetics remains elusive. So I want to expand the discussion of light by looking at Laruelle's writings on photography. By the end I hope to show that Laruelle is essentially a thinker of *utopia*, and that the best way to understand Laruelle's aesthetics, and indeed his larger non-standard method, is as a *theory of utopia*.

Laruelle's two books on photography, *The Concept of Non-Photography* and *Photo-Fiction: A Non-Standard Aesthetics*, include material written over a span of two decades.¹² Intended as companion pieces, the books pose a number of questions. What is seen in a photo? What is light? What is the photographic stance? And, perhaps most enigmatic of all, what does Laruelle mean by fiction?

"Aesthetics was always a case of tracing art within philosophy, and likewise of art understood as a lesser form of philosophy."¹³ For Laruelle aesthetics involves a convoluted interaction between art that asks to be contemplated and contemplation that seeks its art. Art and philosophy co-constitute each other in terms of lack, for each completes the other: "without art, philosophy lacks sensitivity and without philosophy, art lacks thought."¹⁴ This kind of mutual distinction is part and parcel of the philosophical process. Art and philosophy are *separated and reunited*, then policed as conjoined but distinct. A strange logic indeed, yet for Laruelle the logic is evident in everything from Plato's *Republic* to Deleuze and Guattari's *What is Philosophy?*

Photography is "a knowledge that doubles the World," he writes in the first book.¹⁵ As an aesthetic process, photography is philosophical in that it instantiates a decision to correlate a world with an image taken of the world. When photography doubles the world, it acts philosophically on and through the world.

Laruelle does not discuss light much in *The Concept of Non-Photography*. But light appears in the second book, *Photo-Fiction*, particularly in the context of philosophical enlightenment and the flash of the photographic apparatus. Laruelle uses two terms, *éclair* and *flash*, to mark the subtle variations in different kinds of light. Laruelle associates *éclair* more with the tradition of Greek philosophy. "The flash [*éclair*] of Logos," he remarks, "is the Greek model of thought."¹⁶ While he uses *flash* more commonly when discussing the physical apparatus of the photographic camera. Although it would be hasty to assume that Laruelle poses the two terms in normative opposition—*éclair* bad and *flash* good—for by the end he specifies that both kinds of light are philosophical, and that both need to be non-standardized.

As in his other writings, Laruelle accomplishes this by subjecting photography to the non-standard method. He proposes a Principle of Aesthetic Sufficiency and shows how art and aesthetics have traditionally been allied with philosophy. Likewise he describes a Principle of

12. François Laruelle, *The Concept of Non-Photography / Le concept de non-photographie*, trans. Robin Mackay (Falmouth, UK and New York: Urbanomic and Sequence, 2011), and François Laruelle, *Photo-Fiction, a Non-Standard Aesthetics / Photo-fiction, une esthétique non-standard*, trans. Drew Burk (Minneapolis: Univocal, 2012).

13. Laruelle, *Photo-Fiction*, 4, translation modified.

14. Ibid.

15. Laruelle, *The Concept of Non-Photography*, 11.

16. Laruelle, *Photo-Fiction*, 37.

Photographic Sufficiency, indicating how photography is sufficient to accommodate all possible images, at least in principle. In an echo of how deconstructivists spoke of philosophy in terms of logocentrism, Laruelle labels photography's sufficiency a *photo-centrism*, and discusses how philosophy conceives of thought itself as a kind of photographic transcendental.

The process of non-standardization goes by several names and is defined in different ways. In recent writings Laruelle has begun to speak of the non-standard method in terms of *fiction*. Fiction means performance, invention, creativity, artifice, construction; for example, thought is fictive because it fabricates. (Although Laruelle always specifies that such fabrication only happens in an immanent and real sense).

Fiction might seem like a strange word choice for an anti-correlationist, yet Laruelle avoids the vicious circle of correlationism by devising a type of fiction that is non-expressive and non-representational. Laruelle's fiction is purely immanent to itself. It is not a fictionalized version of something else, nor does it try to fabricate a fictitious world or narrative based on real or fantastical events.

“Non-standard aesthetics is creative and inventive on its own terms and in its own way. Non-standard aesthetics is a fiction-philosophy [*philo-fiction*], a philosophico-artistic genre that tries to produce works using only pure and abstract thought. It does not create concepts in parallel to works of art--like that Spinozist Deleuze proposed, even though Deleuze himself was very close to embarking on a non-standard aesthetics.”¹⁷

To subject philosophy to the non-standard method is to create a fiction philosophy. Likewise to subject photography to the same method produces a similar result. “The fiction-photo [*photo-fiction*] is a sort of generic extension or generalization of the 'simple' photo, the material photo.”¹⁸

As he said previously in *The Concept of Non-Photography*, “the task of a rigorous thought is rather to found—at least in principle—an abstract theory of photography—but radically abstract, absolutely non-worldly and non-perceptual.”¹⁹

This begins to reveal the way in which Laruelle's views on photography synchronize with his interest in utopia. Photography is not oriented toward a world, nor is it a question of perception. Rather, by remaining within itself, photography indicates a non-world of pure auto-

17. Ibid., 6, translation modified.

18. Ibid., 55, translation modified. Given that photography indexes and orients itself reflexively in relation to a world Laruelle is intent on labeling all of photography, and indeed philosophy, as characteristically modern, modernist even. “Photography is the Modernist art par excellence,” he remarks. But fiction-photography is different, “fiction-photography [*photo-fiction*] is precisely the passage from an exemplarily modern aesthetics to a contemporary and inventive aesthetics that conjugates the arts and unfolds them” (ibid., 38-39, translation modified). Thus by way of generic extension or generalization, fiction-photography avoids modernism's penchant for both meta reflection and narcissistic autonomy, encapsulated in that old chestnut “art for art's sake.” In this way, Laruelle might be characterized not so much as modern or anti-modern but as “alter-modern,” for he asserts a non-reflexive autonomous real that is not contrary to the modern but exists along side it.

19. Laruelle, *The Concept of Non-Photography*, 8.

impression. Bored by the peculiarities of particular photographic images, Laruelle fixates instead on the simple receptiveness to light generic to all photography. Yet receptiveness does not mean representability or indexicality. That would revert photography back to philosophy. Instead Laruelle radicalizes photic receptiveness as such, focusing on the non-standard or immanent nature of the photographic image.

Rather than a return to phenomenology's notion of being in the world, Laruelle proposes what he calls being-in-photo. By this he means the photo that remains radically immanent to itself. Such a photograph produces a kind of objectivity without representation, a radical objectivity, an "objectivity so radical that it is perhaps no longer an alienation; so horizontal that it loses all intentionality; this thought so blind that it sees perfectly clearly in itself; this semblance so extended that it is no longer an imitation, a tracing, an emanation, a 'representation' of what is photographed."²⁰

But it is not simply the photograph that is recast as non-standard immanence. So too the photographer, the philosopher who thinks photographically about the world. Laruelle elaborates this aspect through what he calls the photographer's stance [*posture*]:

"Stance" — this word means: to be rooted in oneself, to be held within one's own immanence, to be at one's station rather than in a position relative to the "motif." If there is a photographic thinking, it is first and foremost of the order of a test of one's naive self rather than of the decision, of auto-impression rather than of expression, of the self-inherence of the body rather than of being-in-the-World. A thinking that is rooted *in* rather than *upon* a corporeal base.²¹

Here is further demonstration of Laruelle's theory of utopia as immanence. He inverts the conventional wisdom on utopia as a non-place apart from this world. Laruelle's utopia is a non-world, yet it is a non-world that is entirely rooted in the present. Laruelle's non-world is, in fact, entirely real. Revealing his gnostic tendencies, Laruelle's non-standard real is rooted *in* matter, even if the standard world already lays claim to that same space. The non-standard method simply asserts the real in parallel with the world.

In Laruelle the aesthetic stance is the same as the utopian stance. In the most prosaic sense, non-philosophy describes a kind of non-place where conventional rules seem not to apply. To the layman, the non-philosopher appears to use complex hypotheses and counter-intuitive principles in order to journey to the shores of another universe. Yet that doesn't quite capture it. As Laruelle says, *insufficiency* is absolutely crucial to utopia: "We are not saying one has to live according to a well-formed utopia... Our solution lies within an insufficient or negative utopia."²² The point is not to construct bigger and better castles in the sky, transcendental and sufficient for all. Rather, utopia is always finite, generic, immanent, and real.

But non-philosophy is utopian in a more rigorous sense as well, for the structure of the human stance itself is the structure of utopia. Utopia forms a unilateral duality with human imagination; our thinking is not correlated with the world but is a direct clone of the real. This

20. Ibid., 94.

21. Ibid., 12.

22. François Laruelle, *Struggle and Utopia at the End Times of Philosophy*, trans. Drew S. Burk and Anthony Paul Smith (Minneapolis: Univocal, 2012), 12.

begins to resemble a kind of science fiction, a fiction philosophy in which the human stance is rethought in terms of rigorous scientific axioms. It makes sense, then, that Laruelle would call himself a science fiction philosopher, someone who thinks according to utopia.²³

“There are no great utopian texts after the widespread introduction of computers,” Fredric Jameson remarked recently, “the last being Ernest Callenbach’s *Ecotopia* of 1975, where computers are not yet in service.”²⁴

Today, instead of utopian texts, we have the free-market deliria of cyberpunk, which assumes that capitalism is itself a kind of utopia of difference and variety. I think this failure of imagination on the left can be attributed to the assumption that computers are enough to “take care” of totalization: that the well-nigh infinite complexities of production on a global scale, which the mind can scarcely accommodate, are mysteriously...resolvable inside the computer’s black box and thus no longer need to be dealt with conceptually or representationally.²⁵

The end of the utopian text thus signals for Jameson an end to representation. Or at the very least it indicates that representation—as complicated or flawed as it might be under otherwise normal conditions—has been interrupted and outsourced to another domain entirely.

Laruelle's work confirms a particular kind of historical periodization: if indeed utopia perished as narrative or world or image, it was reborn as method. Such is the key to Laruelle's utopianism. For him utopia is a technique, not a story or a world. Utopia is simply the refusal to participate in the Philosophical Decision, a refusal to create worlds. Counterintuitively, then, Laruelle's refusal to create alternative worlds is what makes him a utopian thinker, for his non-standard world is really a non-world, just as utopia is defined as “non-place.” To refuse the philosophical decision is to refuse the world, and thus to discover the non-standard universe is to discover the non-place of utopia.

23. See for example Laruelle, *Struggle and Utopia at the End Times of Philosophy*, 4, where he is explicit about the connection between non-philosophy and the utopia narratives common in science fiction.

24. Fredric Jameson, “In Soviet Arcadia,” *New Left Review* 75 (May-June 2012): 119-127, p. 125.

25. Ibid.