Building Gardens in the Sky

The Irish Sky Garden was not what I expected to find less than a mile from a market town in West Cork. Skibbereen, population 3,000, is known for its weekly cattle auctions and its Friday market days featuring homemade current scones and local blackberry jams. That it should be the focal point of a major art-world scandal, involving a high-flying German dealer named Veith (purchased “right”) Tuske, the American light-and-space artist James Turrell and Tuske’s roster of ambitious avant-garde artists, was almost inconceivable.

When I made that first visit in September 1992 to Lis Ard, Tuske’s estate, I was naive enough to think that the singular goal of Turrell’s Sky Gardens was to create an elevated, imaginative art. Turrell’s structures in the landscape—packing in quite extraordinary, not quite sculpture, not quite architecture, and not even a blend of landscapes and ideas—were presented as being in concert with their splendid natural environment and as honoring the local ecology. I believed the idea put forth by Tuske and his living companion and work partner, Claudia Meister, that its construction, and the tourism it would attract, would give a desperately needed economic lift to the surrounding community. The creators and developers of the Irish Sky Garden appeared as earnest and idealistic as they were wealthy, not half-baked or pretentious.

In the two years since that visit, tales of bankruptcy, entanglements, bankrupty, a suicide, and scrimping, have surfaced around Tuske. Yet not long ago Tuske was welcomed almost anywhere he went. Officials at prestigious Swiss financial institutions were eager to lend him money. Important art-world artists were pleased to be represented by him. Collectors bought millions of dollars’ worth of art from him. Foundation directors eagerly supported his activism. And while Turrell, “the artist of light,” seemed to be concerned with only the purest spiritual values, it would soon come out that he too was embroiled in a rather more earthbound scenario here. I would learn that Tuske had accepted Veith’s invitation to Ireland not just because the dealer offered the artist, whom he had met in Arizona in 1989, a chance to undertake a major new project, but also because Tuske downed a significant amount of animal gain before him. Tuske promised to help Turrell acquire his own magical island off the Irish coast—by working out an elaborate deal for buying real estate through an offshore company and using art as collateral for a loan. Tuske has said that his problems with Tuske were so grave as to understate his ability to work, but he concedes that he got into this position largely because he found Tuske’s and his grandiose schemes irresistible.

That day of my visit to Lis Ard, I approached via a long, winding driveway, past immaculately pruned trees and shrubs. A Range Rover and a couple of other expensive European cars were parked in front of the sprawling stable wing of a huge cream-colored, 19th-century country house. The steps onto the lawns had as many landings and balustrades as an open house. The Irish Sky Garden was being planned behind it in a 10-acre space owned by the non-profit Lis Ard Foundation, which Tuske, his ex-wife and five other directors had set up in 1990.

In a part of the world where even the most urban sensibilities are to be found in an old fisherman’s sweater, and musky blue jeans, Tuske sports laced-up satin. He received me in elegant clothing and then went off to change into a well-tailored houndstooth-check hacking jacket. His thick, dark hair, carefully cut, was swept back off his forehead, his mustache shaped so as to be bold, but not shaggy.

Downstairs, in the starkly contemporary offices of the Lis Ard Foundation, I met Meister. She had a soft, porcelain complexion, delicate features and a wide smile. More understated than Tuske, she was tailored pants, a blouse and a shooting jacket that were a careful juxtaposition of silk, twill and velvet.

Before going outside to view the grounds, we put on Wellingtons. Still in the early stages of construction, the Irish Sky Garden was at this point a series of muddy paths and building sites. But Tuske and Meister pointed here and there as if the project were complete and the cogniscents of the art world were already flocking to it. They said that this scheme would result in a new perception of light. If Turrell was the project’s designer, Tuske was now clearly its developer, propietor and chief advocate.

Tuske exudes energy and awareness. Most of the time, his lively eyes meet yours entirely. He is determined to electrify your personal space. He makes connections, except for those occasional moments when he seems facile, as if he knows some impenetrable secret. His explanation of the Sky Garden, although confusing at first, should be a meditation.

Turrell’s work, Tuske and Meister alternately explained, would consist of five major sites linked by a series of paths and tunnels. These would be an elliptical crater and a mound from which to view the sky unimpeded. Light, natural and raw, was the pivotal element. The tightly regulated program sounded as deliberate and controlling as the rules of a religious cult—both what could and could not be seen had been carefully pre-determined—but it promised considerable spiritual uplift.

The project was going well, they said, with support money from the Lis Ard Foundation’s lifetime members and a substantial grant from the Irish government. Meister told me they were figuring on a total cost of about $4.5 million, and she seemed optimistic about its opening.

But then, oddly, Tuske began to speak with reservations about James Turrell. The artist was not very sympathetic to the environment, the dealer said, with a look of sadness. Tuske said that one of his paramount goals at Lis Ard was the maintenance of the fragile local ecosystem—for which Turrell had no regard. Tuske said that Turrell owned an island off a mile off the coast of Cork, and that the artist—an avid pilot who does much of his thinking from above—had recently destroyed a lot of the natural habitat there by putting in a landing field.

Yet in spite of these shortcomings, Tuske told me "During the day, Veith discussed our marriage problems with my husband, and at night with me. And I thought, 'This man—he has the power to help me....He seduces people. He enthralls you. It opens up a vibrational world.'"—Izhar Palkowick, Veith Tuske's ex-wife.

That he was so happy in Ireland that he had given up Wall Street. After all, he had had a large role in the building of construction, the Irish Sky Garden was at this point a series of muddy paths and building sites. But Tuske and Meister pointed here and there as if the project were complete and the cogniscents of the art world were already flocking to it. They said that this scheme would result in a new perception of light. If Turrell was the project’s designer, Tuske was now clearly its developer, propietor and chief advocate.

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There has been a flurry of activity at Turrle's for the past year. "I have really gone with the development of the project that we are all in," chuckles Turrell. 

Turrle's wife, who ran the Gourd & Henniker's business in New York for 22 years, "Life is too short, so I never wear any thing but silk." But silk had not always been Turrel's prerogative. The son of an embittered soldier who had lost a leg in the First World War, the father of a lawyer, a teenager and a ten-year-old painter, Turrel discovered the glamour and high stakes of the contemporary art world while working part-time at a Düsseldorf museum. Soon afterward, he decided to try his hand at selling paintings at first working out of his apartment. By 1974 he was showing major Swiss and German artists at his own Cologne gallery. In 1980, he went to Switzerland, because people had and spent more money there than in Germany. After dealing privately and then briefly heading a branch of the New York-based Knoedler & Company—according to Knoedler's Lawrence Rubin, there was a falling out over Turrel's spending—and "We very rapidly grew dissatisfied"—he opened Turrel & Turrel in 1985.

While some people in Switzerland jumped to Turrel's defense after the Zurich Art Fair (later repeated in the German magazine ART), others were eager for every detail of Turrel's dealings to be known. In February 1993, Herbert Ross, the prominent Bern gallery owner and auctioneer, took to me to see Franz Gersch and his wife, Maria, who live on an inned hillside an hour from Bern. Gersch was represented by Turrel for 17 years, until 1992. On the drive in, Kneifel remarked that Turrel had managed to live in great luxury in Ireland while going bankrupt in Zurich and failing to pay Gersch and his other artists. "Turrel is the Felix Kroll of the art world," Kneifel said—hardly the first time Thomas Mann's novelist would be invoked in connection with Turrel. Franz and Maria Gersch resemble the mugged, hard-working farmers of Swiss folk art. As we talked, we sat eating Maria's intensive course of bread and backtack with a funny farmhouse Emmetaler and a local mountain cheese. Kneifel had arrived with a basket of freshly baked eggs for Maria. Throughout our conversation, Kneifel kept cutting up the cheese rind the rest of us had cleared, making it into tiny cubes; he said they were for his chickens. Watching him chop away with a butcher's knife from a plain wooden board and tune his quarry into little pieces, I felt as if he were doing what Turrel had done to his artists and their work, and what lots of people would now like to do to Turrel.

"It is just not feasible, the whole thing that Veith has done to us," Maria lamented. "Veith could be friendly and gentle when he wanted, but often I had a sad feeling in my heart; I felt it was not true. I would ask him simple questions, and then he would answer with a so long story that it confused me completely." The Geretsch are memorable not just about what has happened to them, but also about what they did with the Turrel's similar tenancy of Turrel.

In retrospect, it seems clear that Gersch and Veith's—veith—had up to a point—grasped a lot from his association with Turrel. The dealer promoted his work industriously, sold a lot of it and posted the artist's prices up. But Gersch felt backed into Turrel's own past. "Veith decided, as many artists do when confronted with their early work, that it was not up to his standards. He told Turrel that the work should not be resold, a request most dealers would have honored. Turrel redid it anyway, but, claimed Gersch, with the stipulation that his client could never sell it on the market again. Gersch complained that the work has since been changed to $200,000 for having digested once and polished that painting.

Veith accused Turrel—who by their arrangement owned half of the artist's prints—that having used Veith's illegal letter for loans, although their contract forbade such use—was told by Veith that he had lost some prints that he had in effect advanced the dealer to help him try to avoid bankruptcy. He also maintained that Turrel had held back money for art that has been paid for. One recent case, Gersch said, Turrel did pay him—$25,000 for a sale to the Staatliches in Stuttgart in 1985. The payment was in the form of some of Gersch's own prints. Gersch claimed that he was owed $33,000. In 1993, Gersch said, Veith had paid him again—$25,000. "Veith is a manipulator," Gersch said. "Veith is a manipulator." Gersch alleges that even the name of the gallery was a trick: Veith was never a partner, and there never was a second Turrel. It's just that Turrel, Veith's says, thought the double name rang especially true. In 1989, the gallery, formed by the unhappy hills and italk when Veith told her he wanted to go bankrupt, yet possibly buy the gallery back at a later date, she left him.

But when Turrel invited Veith to Liss Ard, it seemed to rejuvenate the dealer's marriage. At Easter 1990, Veith went to Ireland because "Jim was there. He has continued on page 181.
served as collateral for another loan was now due for collection.

Postmortem says that in early April Hetack told her she was going to Ireland to live on the farm behind Lis Ard. But the only parts of her story that Hetack was devastated by were a letter Tartle was writing him for the failure of the gillyweed by not providing additional support.

Postmortem says that Harlekin, according to her estimate, had lent Tartle around $40 million of the bank's money, felt betrayed. On April 9—the day after Postmortem's crucially at the gallery—when his friends thought he was on his way to Ireland, Hetack took an express train to Paris and put a plastic bag on his head.

JAMES TURDLE IS A GENTLEMAN, an instructor in French with a full beard and short hair. When I met with him, we wore gray berets, which jutted out from under his great hat, and we were both fashion victims.

James Turdle, a 40-year-old Frenchman, lived in a studio in the 16th arrondissement of Paris. He was a celebrated artist, known for his intricate, detailed sculptures. His work was exhibited in galleries around the world, and he had gained a reputation for being a recluse.

Turdle's studio was a small, cluttered space. The walls were lined with shelves of his work, and the floor was covered with studio dust. A large canvas of a woman's face was stretched across one wall, and a sculpture of a bird sat on a table in the corner.

Turdle greeted me with a small wave and a nod. We sat on a couch in the middle of the room, and I took notes on a notepad.

“Turdle,” I said, “I understand that you have been working on a large sculpture.”

He nodded, his eyes cast down. “I have been working on it for several years,” he said. “It’s a portrait of a woman who was very important to me.”

“Can you tell me more about her?” I asked.

Turdle hesitated. “She was a poet,” he said finally. “She was my mentor, my teacher. She taught me how to see the world in a different way.”

I nodded, taking notes. “And how has this sculpture helped you to remember her?”

Turdle smiled, a melancholy smile. “It’s a way to keep her memory alive,” he said. “I want it to be a permanent reminder of her presence.”

We sat in silence for a few moments, and then I asked, “Do you think your work will be appreciated by the general public?”

Turdle shook his head. “I doubt it,” he said. “People don’t understand my work, they don’t see the beauty in it. But I don’t care. I do this for myself, for my own satisfaction.”

I nodded. “Can you tell me more about your artistic process?”

Turdle smiled again. “I begin with a sketch,” he said. “I work from my imagination, from my memories. I use clay to shape the form, then I paint it with a brush.”

I watched as he worked, transfixed by the delicate brushstrokes. The sculpture took shape before my eyes, a face that seemed to come to life.

Turdle’s eyes were fixed on his work, a rapturous expression on his face. “I feel like I’m communicating something,” he said. “I feel like I’m sharing something important.”

I nodded, my heart aching with the beauty of it all. “Turdle,” I said finally, “I think your work is incredible. I think it will be appreciated by the world.”

Turdle smiled, a smile of pure joy. “I hope so,” he said. “I hope people will see the beauty in it.”

We sat in silence for a moment, and then I stood up. “Good luck with your work,” I said. “I’ll be looking forward to seeing more of your sculptures.”

Turdle nodded, a small smile on his face. “Thank you,” he said. “I appreciate your support.”

I turned to leave, feeling a deep sense of respect for this artist and his work. As I walked out of the studio, I heard the sound of his sculpture in the background, a small voice coming to life.
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advertisements for Burberry minions. Melani casars a web of indistinct lines. Tuskegee soared at the behest of crowds all banding together in one direction and then another. Nothing in their currentAuthorities and Milton from being able to experience their sur-roundings with genteel delight. Moving on to the gravel of a site that had recently been excavated for one of Tuskegee's observ-a tion pavilions, Tuskegee looked at a sky that to the rest of us, might have appeared gray. "There's a lot of red in the sky today. And yellow," it may have been a pure and simple lie. It may have been what he said or what wasn't said. Yet when he uttered it, it seemed the truth, so much that I too saw the red and yellow.

By the end of 1920, the Sky Gar-dens appeared to be doomed. It was hard to imagine where the money for the proj-ect in Shikibearan could come from, or how Tuskegee and Turell might possibly get together. They had kept on about a couple of occasions and, at one time, signed a legal agreement to resolve their differ-ences, but such agreements revealed the other situations.

Various people in the Irish art world—among them Declan McGuinness, the director of the Irish Museum of Modern Art in Dublin—talked about possibly taking the Sky Gar-dens over, but no Tuskegee was involved. It seemed impossible that Tuskegee would be able to withstand the pressure of all the charges being brought against him from so many direction, yet he was so extended at Liss Ard that was equally hard to figure out how he might soon pass.

But when I returned to County Cork this summer, there was a flurry of activity at Liss Ard. Some 30 people were building and digging. It was told that the money to pay them all and keep the proj-ect going was coming from the Robert J. Knight Social Fund. Distributed by the Irish Department of Works, these funds are intended for the relief of unemployment. A local businessman remarked that, wher-ever Tuskegee's history, it might well be the Irish government's position the sky has been to pur- chase elsewhere to the extent that it's little bit into the same problem as the same people to be "the same," the

The newspapers gave glowing reviews. Some came of the opening of Liss Ard and Lake Lodge—a luxury hotel on the estate. Color photos in the Gas Everett showed details of completed construction at this "mature lover's Paradise." The total project, which now had a cost of $6 million attached to it, was called "the vision of Tuskegee." James and Julia Turell visited a very different view on all of this, how- ever. On the telephone from Arzona, Julia, her voice key, said that it was illegal for Tuskegee to refer to any of the work at Liss Ard as being by Jim. Turell himself at first was caught up in the wave of the still to this in Ireland. It's not my work. The Sky Garden is my title, not his. He was "supposed to be prevailing the ownership of the property, which he claims to never have received any money," the artist complained. Turell confirmed a tale that friends from a village near Liss Ard had heard of one of his beers from the involvement of the island in open boats might this winter. The beers were report-edly done to the gardens under the weight of ancient antiquities and technologies and Tuskegee's other beloved objects. But in general, Tuskegee felt helpless. "There is little action to take. He has everything tucked away in offshore companies. You come across some people like this. Life goes on. There's nothing further I can do."

On the other hand, Turell managed to some considerable success this summer practically in Tuskegee's backyard. The artist stowed in two locations in Cork City, and installed a gate and a pail for his Garden. The walls were very well. One survey observer who knows both Tuskegee and Turell sees these success as the artist's way of getting back at Tuskegee. "It's a case of locked jeeps. Jim is incapable of coming up with an easily marketable thing, so if there were to be a treaty, Tuskegee would come to it sooner. Jim's desire to come back in Ireland was promised in part by his desire to escape Tuskegee's "bad畔on we are talking," according to the Government's tax returns. But foundation executives have to be careful about these and all kinds of business arrangements, above all in need of one of the most feared terms in the states and foundations self-dealing. Self-dealing is basically a foreseen insider trading; it's vaguely defined as behavior that breaches the fiduciary responsibilities of a foundation's direct or trustee. People involved in the foundation are forbidden to do any kind of business with the organization on their own account. What this means is that anything hoping to get an art work for its private collection, to selling another foundation, to giving away foundation assets in order to enhance their own standing in the community could be interpreted as self-dealing.

The most spectacular case of self-dealing involved the late Bernard Reis, an executive of the Mark Reis Rothko estate as well as a director of the Rothko Foundation. After the artist's suicide in 1970, his foundation retained some of his properties. Reis then entered into exclusive contracts on behalf of the estate for the sale of Rothko paintings through New York's Marlborough Gallery. There were two problems: one, Reis was both a major collector and an accountant with lucrative business connections; two, he allowed Marlborough to buy the works at an artificially low price. After years of litigation and appeals, Reis and his fellow executors were removed by the Reis Foundation was accused, and Marlborough's owner, Frank Lloyd, was fined $90,000. The IRS ultimately found Reis liable for $21 million in back taxes, but to the retrospective of $21 million. The accumulation of cash is another trick handed to the foundation world. New York law, for example, includes charitable trusts from accumulating an uncov erable amount of income. If the pur- pose of a given charitable trust is to make more than $2 million in cash and investments, "govern- ing board shall immediately cause to be distributed the income to the extent that is necessary or advisable to carry out the purposes of the trust." The trustee was then able to use the income to their advantage. "The donors of the trust will receive a stream of income that will be distributed to the income beneficiaries of the trust," explains Steven Deeds, the director of the Charter Institute, the New York Attorney General's Office. In this July, the office sued the trustees of the Joseph and Robert Cornell Memorial Foundation to compel them to distribute cash gifts. The board, named after the artist, who died in 1972, and his brother, was initially founded in 1982 with $21 million in cash and securities. It has since accrued $21 million in cash and securities (not including the sale of the Cornell art, which according to the Attorney General was valued in 1987 at $21.2 million), while issuing just a single cash gift of $1.0 million in 1983 to the Yale Leavitt Music Hall in Brunswick, N.C.

The lawsuit charges that the trustees received excess commissions "because the income derived from the Foundation's holdings had been inflated by the names' failure to give away money."

Morton Mamker, lawyer for the Cornell Foundation's two trustees, responds, "The attorney general doesn't want to recognize that some $7 million worth of gifts in the form of Cornell ac- tions have gone to Cornell museums. He says you really can't count on the "great gift unless it's cash." Last year, the foundation gave Cornell boards and college to six museums, including the New Orleans Museum of Art and the Walker Art Center.

It is still, although leaving the matter ultimately up to the trustees, Cornell clearly stated that his "preference" was "that none of any works of art be given to any art museum or collection," and that any foundation was recognized, and Marlborough's owner, Frank Lloyd, was fined $90,000. The IRS ultimately found Reis liable for $21 million in back taxes, but to the retrospective of $21 million. The accumulation of cash is another trick handed to the foundation world. New York law, for example, includes charitable trusts from accumulating an uncov erable amount of income. If the pur- pose of a given charitable trust is to make more than $2 million in cash and investments, "govern-