

Olafur Eliasson: Verklighetsmaskiner/Reality machines

*We Have Never Been Displaced*

Timothy Morton

A funny thing happened on the way to ecological awareness: space collapsed. We moderns and postmoderns had been banking on place collapsing, all that meaning evaporating in the empty or emptying box of pure difference, or pure mathematics. We were all set to raise a glass to the end of place, which we had been seeing as a distressingly out-of-date, conservative concept.

But it was space that evaporated, while place remained. This is no longer our familiar, lovable concept of place, however. That concept had to do exclusively with *human* places. What we are coming to realize is that human places exist within and alongside thousands and thousands of nonhuman places, overlapping, intersecting, interpenetrating with “our” place.

By force majeure, the anthropocentric copyright control on the concept of place has lifted. And space has been revealed as anthropocentric through and through. What an astounding paradox. But it makes perfect sense. Space is really a projection of sets of human tools for accomplishing human goals, like measuring the width of the galaxy or traveling on a highway or planning a building. No matter how big it is, space is the human-scaled concept, handy and universally applicable.

We have been telling ourselves that homogeneous, empty “space” has conquered localized, particular “place.” Either we are the kind of person who thinks that the category of place is a quaint antique. Or we are the kind of person who thinks that the category is worth preserving because it *is* antique. We are the same kind of person in a certain way. The first kind of person is your traditional environmentalist. According to this kind of person, we used to live in places, and then at some bad Fall-like moment we found ourselves floating helplessly in space. Place is reliable and friendly and constantly there: you can visit it, plant things in it, reminisce about it. Space is scary and displacing (literally dis-placing, undermining place) and you can’t point to it, so it is not constantly there. If you are the other kind of person, the space-person, you also believe in this kind of place – you just think that it’s not that great. You think place is old-fashioned, oppressive, restrictive of mobility. Perhaps the one difference is that you might think that place is wholly an illusion – a metaphysical construct existing only in the deluded minds of less sophisticated people who have not yet attended a theory class.

Both of you would be wrong. And this is for a number of very interesting reasons. Despite appearances, place is precisely *not* constantly, metaphysically there. Place is where we begin to see

how appearances and beings are weirdly inseparable in a disturbing, uncanny way that we cannot directly point to. And place is not exclusively my human realm, so it is not reliable either. Some other being might occupy it differently, and even more significantly; that other being might have its own version of place, overlapping (or not) with our place.

When we think about embodiment that way, things become very interesting. The idea that *We have never been disembodied*, the title of Olafur Eliasson's recent exhibition at Mirrored Gardens just outside Guangzhou, does not mean that we are solid and reliable and "there." Disembodiment – which is what the concept of space is all about – has turned out to be the solid, metaphysical, "reliable" one – the one we can rely on if we want to overrun an Indonesian spice forest in the Renaissance or organize a neat-looking factory farm. *We have never been disembodied* implies *We have never been displaced*: we are always caught in something, or rather we are always *caught in some things*. Place is like a room filled with a joyful plenitude of geometrical shapes, each one unique and distinct. What the shapes reveal has nothing to do with abstract extension designed for convenient anthropocentric access. A teeming world of possibilities is what appears, a crowded cocktail party of curves and planes, as if each shape were a person, with her or his own emotional time zone.

By putting beautiful giant spheres of thin glass amid human rubble, Eliasson shows us something uncanny: this pile of discarded things is its own place, not simply an abandoned human one. It is as if we were looking at the space time around two planets, somehow magically visible as metal and concrete and wood: a thick world, a rich world – rich not only in the conventional human sense, but rather rich in itself.

Many have pronounced the death of place since the 1970s. Yet the coordinates are terribly out of date. In a twist no one foresaw (because we were not looking outside the human), space has by no means conquered place. That postmodern meme was simply a late symptom of the modern myth of transcending one's material conditions.

*Exactly the opposite has occurred.* From the standpoint of the genuinely post-modern ecological era, what has collapsed is (the fantasy of empty, smooth) *space*. "Space" has revealed itself as the convenient fiction of white Western imperialist humans, just as Euclidean geometry has been revealed by relativity theory to be a small human-flavored region of a much more liquid Gaussian space time, its straight lines and concepts of space-as-container good enough to be getting on with if you want to voyage around the coast of Africa to reach the Spice Islands. The world is so much more independent of us and so much more playful than that. Just as Herman Minkowski proved relativity using geometry, Olafur Eliasson shows, in *Verklighetsmaskiner / Reality machines*, how geometrical beings have their own life, such that geometry is not just how humans format a preexisting blankness.

According to relativity, a thing really is more like a fountain than a static lump, a turbulent surge. And there are always parts of reality that we will never see, even though we know they are happening.

*Space* has collapsed and *place* has emerged in its truly monstrous, wondrous, uncanny dimension, which is to say its non-human dimension. How? Now that the globalization dust has settled and the global warming data is in, we humans find ourselves on a very specific planet with a very specific biosphere. It's not Mars. It is planet Earth. It very much has to do with our awareness that we live in a sphere – the biosphere – on a sphere – Earth. This awareness has nothing to do with holding the whole world in our hands as we thought in the early 1970s we might be doing by now, especially if we had been touched by the Earthrise photographs from the Moon. Holding the world in your hands is a feeling of power: we could crush this glass ball if we wanted. Instead, we find ourselves like spectators who find themselves looking at one of Eliasson's glass globes: we are "there," observing things that slide against us, the powers emanated by the non-human spheres themselves.

Our sense of planet is not a cosmopolitan rush but rather the uncanny feeling that there are all kinds of places at all kinds of scale: dinner table, house, street, neighborhood, Earth, biosphere, ecosystem, city, bio-region, country, tectonic plate. Moreover and perhaps more significantly: bird's nest, beaver's dam, spider web, whale migration pathway, wolf territory, bacterial microbiome. And these places, as in the concept of spacetime, are inextricably bound up with different kinds of timescale: dinner party, family generation, evolution, climate, (human) "world history," DNA, lifetime, vacation, geology; and again the time of wolves, the time of whales, the time of bacteria. In the exhibition, the circus crowd of curves and surfaces smiles and plays, resistant to our agenda. It is as if the artist is not imposing his will, but rather appreciating an icosahedron or a complex net of parabolas as one would a lion or an oak tree. Curating them, as in caringly letting them be. Walking through them, our bodies tinted by their elemental colors. In so doing, we realize we are one shape among others, trundling or tumbling around with a spiky ball, a bristling star. We smile as we jostle along, relieved of the burden of being in the middle.

So many intersecting places, so many scales, so many non-humans. Place now has nothing to do with good old reliable constancy. What has dissolved is the idea of *constant presence*: the myth that something is real insofar as it is consistently, constantly "there." The concept *space* was always a constant-presencing machine for making things appear consistent and solid, to make them easier to colonize, enslave and plunder. Constant presence was part of an anthropocentric colonization protocol. The planetary awareness vaguely imagined by white Western humans in fantasies about the Spice Islands and global trade is now upon us, and it has nothing to do with the rush of deterritorialization, of

finding oneself unbound and unhinged. It is almost the opposite. We find ourselves on the insides of much bigger *places* than those constituted by humans. Whose place is it anyway?

It is *space* that has turned out to be the anthropocentric concept, now that we are able to think it without a myth of constant presformatence. Celebrations of deracination and nostalgia for the old ways are both fictional. It is as obvious to any indigenous culture as it now is to anyone with datasets about global warming that these were stories white Westerners were telling themselves, two sides of the same story in fact. The ecological era is the revenge of place, but it's not your grandfather's place. This isn't some organic village we find ourselves in.

Place deeply involves time, because place does not stay still but bends and twists. When you approach your destination you can sometimes feel quite disoriented. You may enhance the magnification on Google Maps to make sure you are really there. The local is far from the totally known or knowable. It is familiar, which also means that it is uncanny (German *unheimlich*, related to *heimisch*, "familiar" and "unfamiliar," "intimate" and "monstrous" at the same time). Nearness does not mean obviousness: just ask someone looking at a dust mite down a scanning electron microscope. When massive entities such as global warming become thinkable, they grow near. They are so massively distributed that we can't directly grasp them empirically. We vaguely sense them out of the corner of our eye while seeing the data in the center of our vision. These "hyperobjects" remind us that *the local is in fact the uncanny*. Space evaporates. The nice clean box has melted. We are living on a Gaussian sphere where parallel lines do indeed meet. Things bend and fold. The empty void of space and the rush of infinity have been unmasked as parochial paradigms.

The holism in which the whole is greater than sum of its parts depends on some (false) concept of smooth, homogeneous universality or space or infinity. It depends in short on a Euclidean anthropocentric geometry. Since they do not fit into the quaint category of space, what hyperobjects reveal is that the whole is always weirdly *less* than the sum of its parts. Take the new "megacities" such as Houston. For architects and urban planners, megacities are hard to conceptualize: where do they start and stop? Can one even point to them, in a straightforward way? And isn't it strange that entities so obviously gigantic and so colossally influential on their surroundings and economies worldwide should be so hard to point to? The fact that we cannot point to megacities is profoundly because we have been looking in the wrong place for wholes. We keep wondering when the pieces will add up to something much greater. But now that we are truly aware of the global (as in global warming), we know that a megacity is a place among places that is bigger on the inside than it is on the outside. Places contain multitudes. Place is kaleidoscopic.

We humans are not negation monsters who blot out everything in our path: we Europeans and Americans were just telling ourselves that as we deforested the Amazon. We are not living in that kind of world at all, because strictly speaking, *there is no void* at all: reality is stuffed full of entities of all kinds, each one emitting its own special kind of place, its own geometry – perhaps more precisely, a spatiotemporal manifold that ripples and moves, vibrating all by itself. We humans are in fact highly sensitized, chameleon-like beings who constantly attune to other beings – in fact we allow them to tune us, to paint us with their colors. We follow the wake of the sperm whale; we have butterflies in our stomach; we are imprinted with trees and soaked in water. We walk beside a mossy wall.

The NASA “Earthrise” photos which now look like charming and simplistic relics of an age in which human hubris was still mostly unnoticed; relics of a “space age” that evaporates in the age of giant non-human places. We have gone from having “the whole world in our hands” and “I’d like to buy the world a Coke” to realizing that the whole world including “little” us is in the grip of a gigantic entity – ourselves as the human species, which we now know is a geophysical force on a planetary scale. This uncanny sense of existing on more than one scale at once has nothing to do with the pathos of cradling a beautiful blue ball in the void.

But is horror or melancholy the final and best ways to appreciate this multitude of scales? We humans allow places to happen to us. Now we are allowing gigantic non-human places to penetrate our worlds. The work of Olafur Eliasson allows us to witness this astonishing shift in perspective in slow motion. Perhaps at first this shift strikes us as overwhelming, painful and tragic, as our domination of Earth has led us to the paradox of seeing how reality was never exclusively ours. But Eliasson wants us to go beyond tragedy, or rather to allow tragedy to relax into the larger space of *comedy*, the thousand different crystals of paper, wood and fuzz. When something just is what it is, when something is caught in its style, this is funny. What could be more caught in its style than a specific geometrical form? Yet this style is never fully available: we can never see all the dimensions of a thing at once. Things are what they are independent of us, yet never as they appear. Things are tricky, playful. Now put a lot of playful forms together: a helix, a cube, a geodesic sphere. Who are these strange friendly clowns, each with its own agenda? We are invited to participate with other beings in a realm that has something more playful than we expected. Eventually, ecological awareness means being able to smile.