

Olafur Eliasson: Verklighetsmaskiner/Reality machines

Introduction

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Our picture of the world is not constant or static. What we call reality is in part created by our senses. But the brain's interpretation of the senses – reactions to external stimuli that sensory receptors turn into neural responses – is also influenced by cultural factors. Biology and culture are correlated. In this way, the histories of culture and of the senses are entwined. One example of this is the heightened status of sight alongside the emergence of modernity since the machine-based production calls for visual supervision rather than manual dexterity. New condensed cityscapes fragment the perception of their inhabitants and evoke what writers, including August Strindberg, have come to depict as confused sensory impressions; previously unknown anxieties have emerged, such as agoraphobia. According to intellectual historian Karin Johannisson, the senses are not only able to “inure, educate and train, but can also create and recreate reality.”

Perception is central to the art of Olafur Eliasson. He has described his works as tools with which to explore the world around us critically and through which we can experience reality anew. His art is about becoming aware of *what* we are seeing as much as it is about observing ourselves *when* we are seeing – acknowledging our presence and participation in any given situation. Or in the artist's words: “seeing yourself seeing”. In his early work *Beauty* (1993), a perforated tube is mounted onto the ceiling of a dark room. A visible spotlight illuminates the curtain of fog that is being created by the thousands of droplets falling to the ground. The work only materializes when you stand at a certain angle in relation to the light, which is then refracted in the drops of water, so that a rainbow literally appears in the eyes of the beholder. Even though the artwork is made up of physically tangible components, *Beauty* is ephemeral and immaterial – an optical phenomenon. Illusions are shattered. The work, like the idea of the reality that it recreates, is exposed as a construction.

Olafur Eliasson's practice encompasses (but is not limited to) sculpture, painting, photography, film, and installations as well as architectural projects and site-specific works in public spaces. Light, wind, and water in all their forms are recurring features. But to speak of nature as a ‘motif’ is not fruitful; in his works, nature is more present as their medium. In the year 2000, without advance warning, Eliasson carried out a work in Stockholm called *Green river*. Strömmen, a central waterway, was dyed an intense green color by a non-toxic compound usually used to study the

movements of currents in watercourses and the ocean. During the brief period of time that the work existed, this familiar space in the city was made more visible and yet more foreign.

Certain lines of inquiry, methods, and experimental approaches permeate Eliasson's architectural projects and his creations for artistic contexts. As such, trying to draw a line between art and architecture becomes less important. The facades of Harpa, Reykjavik Concert Hall and Conference Centre (2005–11), were designed by Olafur Eliasson and Studio Olafur Eliasson in collaboration with Henning Larsen Architects. The building's southern facade is made up of transparent dichromatic 'quasi bricks' also designed by Eliasson and his studio. The quasi brick, which appears in various constellations in several of Eliasson's works, can be described as a stackable, twelve-sided brick based on fivefold symmetry. Its shape references the basalt columns that are commonly found in Iceland's nature. Like most of Eliasson's buildings and pavilions, the facade of Harpa is mostly transparent and the hundreds of quasi bricks make up both its structure and its aesthetic figuration.

Olafur Eliasson: Verklighetsmaskiner/Reality machines has been organized by Moderna Museet in collaboration with ArkDes, the Center of Architecture and Design. The exhibition spans Eliasson's entire career, from the early 1990s to the present day. It begins with *Model room* (2003), a landscape of geometrical models and objects, many of which were created by Eliasson in collaboration with the recently deceased Icelandic mathematician and architect Einar Thorsteinn. Over the years this work has generated an ever-growing three-dimensional archive: a collection of substantialized ideas, some of which were further developed and realized later on in other installations, pavilions and projects. For instance, Eliasson's ongoing investigations provide the foundation for the new work *Less ego wall* (2015), a partly openwork construction, the complex geometric structure of which makes up one wall of the exhibition. The wall is constructed from stackable modules made of stainless-steel mirrors, creating a pattern that reflects the room and our own image. *Model room* can also be seen as an expression of the artist's view of the importance of guiding thoughts to action. Ideas need to take shape if they are to be tested, and their realization in itself is important. By extension, this can also be applied to questions of democracy or the individual experience of influencing society and the world at large through an action. According to Eliasson, places and rooms as well as cityscapes and public spaces can be defined as either inclusive or exclusive. The former can be influenced; the latter do not invite participation. The idea of a museum as a public space, and the function, responsibility, and potential of museums has long engaged Eliasson. He views the museum as one of the few arenas where people with different outlooks can meet and share experiences.

In Studio Olafur Eliasson in Berlin, around ninety people – architects, art specialists, technicians, engineers, designers, and cooks, among others – are all working together to realize projects. This broad scope of talent reflects the studio's activity and Eliasson's method of realizing ideas in an experimental and investigative way, often in dialogue. Philosophy, psychology, mathematics, and the natural sciences are clearly present in his artistic practice. Collaborators and partners in dialogue are sought out across the sciences. In literature about Eliasson, phenomenology (along with individuals such as Maurice Merleau-Ponty) is often cited as an early, meaningful source of inspiration. The philosopher and sociologist Bruno Latour has been important to the artist in later years, as has the author and philosopher Timothy Morton, who has written one of the texts in this catalogue. The *light and space* artists of the American West Coast, including Robert Irwin, can also be counted among his central influences.

Movement in various forms characterizes many of the exhibition's installations. Sometimes movement is an inherent part of the work. For example in *Ventilator* (1997) a fan circulates in irregular pathways above our heads as a result of the draft generated by its own motor. In other works – *Beauty* (1993), for instance – the components are static, and the viewer's own movements take center stage. In some cases we move through the work, as in *I only see things when they move* (2004) or *Seu corpo da obra* (Your body of work) (2011). In *Moss wall* (1994), appearing in the first room of the exhibition, one of the walls is covered by a dense carpet in various green hues. Nature's ground cover has been moved indoors, and lichen has been mounted by hand to form a vertical organic tapestry. The work references the historical tradition of Nordic landscape painting, but instead of depicting nature, its flora literally have entered the institution. Nature has become part of culture. These ideas are also found in ecology and in the relatively new discipline known as object-oriented ontology. It calls into question a long-dominant anthropocentric view, in which mankind has established its superior position at the expense of animals and nature. Instead, our age is described as the Anthropocene geological epoch, which began when the actions of the human race first had lasting global consequences for the planet's ecosystem. According to this theory, humankind can no longer be distinguished from nature (if one can even speak of Nature); we are fully integrated. Humankind no longer has access to untouched or archetypal nature. Everything has become culture. This theory reevaluates the position of the subject, like Dualism's subject/object. In Eliasson's installation *The sandstorm park* (1999), the floor is covered with sand. A tube, connected to an air-compressor and activated by a motion sensor, hangs from the ceiling. The viewer's presence and movements in the room activate the compressor: the tube fills with air and moves

quickly, like a snake or a rapid three-dimensional drawing, blowing sand in all directions. An interactive, man-made sandstorm rises: yet another image of nature as a construction.

Eliasson gives light and color the same significance as more physically tangible materials. Optical phenomena are investigated and examined. In his 1810 book on the theory of colors, *Zur Farbenlehre*, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe describes color as a psychological phenomenon belonging to the viewer. In Eliasson's *Room for one colour* (1997), a room is filled with nothing but a yellow mono-frequency light in which the eye can only distinguish yellow and black. Reality is altered. When the viewer leaves the yellow room, an after-image in the complementary color (blue) remains on the retina. An after-image is an optical phenomenon that occurs when the eye attempts to compensate for unilateral stimulation. The phenomenon is fleeting and fades away after the initial exposure. This means that when two people who were physically present in that room at the same time have left the room, they can still experience after-images of varying intensities, depending on the length of their exposure. The work does not only exist inside the room; it is assimilated by the viewer.

Even mixing and applying color – actions that for centuries have been fundamental to artists – are entrusted to the viewer in *Seu corpo da obra* (Your body of work) (2011). In this installation, monochromatic color filters create semi-transparent walls that float in the room like flat vertical soap bubbles. Transparent yet clearly defined spaces take shape, and together they create a labyrinthine architecture of colored space. Through the viewer's movements in the room, the wall-filter's three colors – magenta, yellow, and cyan – can be seen overlapping in a variety of configurations and various hues emerge. Color is created on the retina when the light reflected by an object reaches our eyes. According to Eliasson, this means that when we analyze color, what color is, and how it is created – when we consider that we are co-creators of color – we are reminded yet again of our participation in shaping our picture of existence.

Olafur Eliasson shifts our focus from the art object itself to the very experience of seeing. At the same time, his work brings about situations that invite us to challenge, renegotiate, and reinterpret our understanding of the world. Reality is recreated.