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## Reaching out!: Activating space in the art of Olafur Eliasson

Olivia Eriksson

Heading for the exhibition's main hall, I finally reach a series of rooms where the floors have been covered with rock and gravel. I am hesitant at first, lingering by the doorpost before I tentatively step out onto the otherwise empty riverbed landscape. The experience is bewildering in all its simplicity. Making my way through the rooms I find myself smiling in amazement. Looking around I feel as though I have travelled to another dimension where the walls of the white cube are all that remain of the original location. Step by step I cover the ground stretching out before me, following the stream of water that runs through the different levels and breathing in the smell of the wet stones. I find myself being in-between sites and I keep a careful eye on where I put my feet. The stones are slippery and even though I have been carried away to another time and space, a museum is no place for unwanted tumbles.

'What is it that makes a space productive?', asks Olafur Eliasson in a recent documentary.<sup>21</sup> For Eliasson, the main object of interest is the people experiencing his works. He often stresses the importance of the perceiving subject, activating space with his or her physical presence. His recent exhibition *Riverbed* at the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art in Humlebæk, Denmark (20 August 2014 – 4 January 2015)<sup>22</sup> is no exception, as it focuses on the movement of the museum visitor navigating through the uneven surface of the riverbed landscape in the museum's south wing. Alongside this site-specific installation the exhibition also features three video works that are screened in a separate room; a reading room; and a 'model room', exhibiting an extensive sample of models produced in the collaborative Olafur Eliasson Studio in Berlin.

The exhibition uses bodily movement as a structuring theme while the visitor is invited to parallel the transition of natural material into the museum space with an exploratory museum hike. This proves to be a journey of discovery with a potential to turn inward on itself, leading us back to the experience of the here and now and, ultimately, to ourselves. The installation is no doubt the central piece of the exhibition, but I think it is equally interesting to look at how the video works function within this framework by relating the on-screen representations to the experience of the riverbed landscape.

Located in Humlebæk outside of Copenhagen, on a hill just above the water of Øresund and housed in several connected buildings that are enclosed by a beautiful sculpture park, Louisiana seems ideally situated for hosting an exhibition that incorporates natural elements and encourages a museum visitor in motion. *Riverbed* is Eliasson's first solo exhibition at the museum, though his works have previously formed part of several group exhibitions at Louisiana. Born in Denmark in 1967 to Icelandic parents, schooled at the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts in Copenhagen, Eliasson's career took off in the 1990s and he has since then become a renowned installation artist, exhibiting large-scale works in various institutions as well as in public spaces. Known for using organic materials such as moss, ice, and rock in combination with innovative technology to reconfigure natural phenomena within the gallery walls, Eliasson's work shares affinities with the Californian Light and Space movement.<sup>23</sup>

In what is probably his most famous piece to date, Eliasson constructed an artificial sun in the Tate Modern turbine hall in 2003. *The Weather Project* was immensely popular and has become a recurring point of reference within installation art ever since. The association with the Light and Space movement is also apparent in Eliasson's recent exhibition at the Fondation Louis Vuitton in Paris (Contact, 17 December 2014 – 23 February 2015), where the interaction between light, shadow, and geometrical shapes forms a central part of the exhibition experience. Eliasson's work is also related to the Land Art of the 1960s and 1970s, which is a more obvious reference in relation to the Louisiana exhibition. In particular, the site/non-site works of Robert Smithson come to mind, where natural substance from the outside was brought in to the gallery to denote 'an elsewhere'.<sup>24</sup> However, both exhibitions share a concern for the perceiving subject and make way for an embodied and sense-activating experience. This consistent emphasis on phenomenological qualities in Eliasson's art can also be traced back to the concerns of minimalist sculpture. Eliasson's work is generally understood within these practices as a contemporary response to the idea of the spectator co-producing the artwork in the physicality of the exhibition space.

This is true for *Riverbed* as well. Whether you choose to simply walk through the installation, or stop to pick up and feel the structure of the stones, or jump back and forth over the water stream, the landscape sets the stage for an immediate and physical experience. The white cube transforms the familiar organic material of the landscape and this merging of two very different locations is negotiated through movement, the visitor binding them together with her embodied presence. However, the empty riverbed landscape is not necessarily charged by an 'active' visitor. As Kate Mondloch points out in relation to media installation art, inscribing a participatory spectator into the installation itself may produce a forced reaction rather than an emancipatory feeling of co-production: '[w]hile

installation art's bid for the spectator's involvement is routinely understood to constitute an open-ended invitation that constructs a critically aware viewer, the "invitation" runs the risk of demanding a predetermined and even compulsory response.<sup>25</sup> While Eliasson himself suggests that there is 'critical potential in motion',<sup>26</sup> this remark could be targeted against current discussions on the mobile spectator of moving image art where the tendency to, in Erika Balsom's words, 'conflate physical stasis with regressive mystification and physical ambulation with criticality [...] is increasingly being displaced.'<sup>27</sup>

Eliasson's claim that a mobile gaze is somehow inherently non-consuming seems even more problematic when considering the historical figure of the flâneur. However, the emphasis on bodily movement does highlight the spatial and temporal qualities of the work. To move is to relate physically to time, and the spatial exploration that the landscape brings forth generates a heightened sense of being in the world. In my view this is the great virtue of the installation, what Eliasson refers to as an instance where you as the perceiving subject 'update your presence' in the here and now of the experience.<sup>28</sup> By challenging our habitual understanding of the world (what belongs in which context), we are forced to reassess our own position in relation to what surrounds us. To Eliasson, people make space productive.

Whereas the insertion of organic material into the museum space blurs the borders between inside and outside, the inclusion of video works accentuates the



*Fig. 1: Olafur Eliasson, 'Riverbed' (2014), installation shot. Photo: Anders Sune Berg. Credit: Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, Humlebæk.*



*Fig. 2: Olafur Eliasson. Video still from 'Your Embodied Garden' (2013), HDV 16:9, 09:23 min (60-65). Courtesy of Fondation Louis Vuitton. © 2013 Olafur Eliasson.*

difference between an actual place and an imaginary one existing outside of the museum. The presentational qualities of installation art are thereby posited against the representational medium of film. In surveying the inherent qualities of motion, two of the films tie specifically into the exhibition's larger theme. *Movement Microscope* (2011) takes place in the artist's studio in Berlin, where the daily activities of the artist collective working there is complemented with the minimal motion of dancers who investigate their relation to each other and to the surrounding space in slow motion patterns. Functioning as an analogy to the activities carried out by the museum visitor in the main hall, the film manifests the link between bodily interaction and time, which is in this case further accentuated by the actual work in progress taking place in close proximity to the dancers. Screened in a room that has been furnished with a provisional wooden structure functioning as bleachers, the physical probing depicted on the screen and the movement inscribed in the experience of the main site invest the viewing subject with a bodily awareness in the experience of different but co-existing contexts. In addition, the captivating motion patterns of the dancers call forth a mimetic relation, as spectators attempt to try out the different kinds of hand movements continuously repeated on the screen for themselves. Mirroring the actions taking place in an elsewhere, the spectators thereby finish the trajectory initiated in the main site, where body, motion, and time are linked in the oscillation between an actual and an imaginary place.

In *Your Embodied Garden* (2013) a solo dancer performs a sequence akin to the

ones depicted in *Movement Microscope*, only this time the location is a Chinese garden. A circular mirror construction plays a central role in the piece, essentially acting like a frame in itself, which blocks our view at times and gives us an incoherent image of the garden and the dancer's body. Shifting in and out of focus, the image also corresponds to a to and fro motion as the dancer, limb by limb, investigates the limits of his body in a simultaneous exploration of the surrounding garden. The third film, *Innen Stadt Außen* (2010), does not incorporate dance but similarly deals with our understanding of our surroundings. In this piece large mirrors have been mounted onto cars and the resulting reflections provide us with a different perspective on reality, a parallel dimension that is momentarily fused with its surroundings, resulting in something that at times looks almost like a split screen. In this way, this film allows for differing world-views to come together through the deconstruction of reality. This kind of dialogic exchange in combination with a will to challenge our perception of what lies between us and the rest of the world, opening up to different interpretations, is in my view the underlying drive that structures Eliasson's work. Given the exhibition's theme of bodily movement it is interesting to note that all three video works are screened in a conventional setting, with a dedicated seating area provided for the viewers. Spreading out the dancers' motions across multiple screens and introducing a mobile spectator into the equation may have done even more to strengthen their inclusion in the exhibition.



*Fig. 3: Olafur Eliasson, 'Model Room' (2003), installation shot. Photo: Anders Sune Berg. Credit: Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, Humlebæk.*

Claire Bishop has argued in relation to Nicolas Bourriaud's *Relational Aesthetics* (1998) – an influential account of a certain kind of installation art in the 1990s that premiered a collective experience where spectators would interact with each other as well as with the artworks, resulting in a sense of community – that what is easily forgotten in such attempts is 'what *types* of relations are being produced, for whom, and why?'<sup>29</sup> Bishop dismantles the connection between open-ended, participatory art works and an essentially democratic mode of reception, arguing that lack of friction risks generating a uniform response that caters to the artist's intentions. Although Eliasson's art is not included in Bourriaud's account<sup>30</sup> it nevertheless ties into the idea of creating a sense of togetherness through the investigation of self in a public space:

[w]hen I talk about [...] seeing yourself, I mean *in relation to others*. Being inclusive – institutionally, as well – means facilitating a platform where people can be together and share something, even though they might otherwise completely disagree.<sup>31</sup>

Eliasson embraces the idea of handing his work over to the people experiencing it, inviting them to co-produce it with him – though questions such as in what ways a visitor is controlled or restrained by an exhibition layout do not fit as well into the picture. While the riverbed landscape encourages, if you will, a certain kind of emancipatory spectatorial behaviour, this may or may not be in line with museum protocol, which inevitably sets the frame for the overall experience. Following Bishop's critique it could also be argued that the installation runs the risk of producing a carefree kind of environment, where all tension and conflict have been left by the museum door. As for being inclusive, it should be noted that the exhibition is not accessible for someone using a wheelchair; also, the *Model Room* (2003), which could have been an ideal site for those with impaired vision, is strictly hands-off. Nevertheless, I would argue that there is a critical pull in the way the exhibition opens up to a dialogic in-between state, a place for turning inwards and 'updating your presence' alongside other bodies in space. It is about activating space in the most literal sense, but it also involves finding out more about yourself in unfamiliar surroundings, to reach out and find your place in the world – *your* embodied garden.

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## Notes

21. Eliasson in *Olafur Eliasson: Space is Process* (H. Lundø and J. Jørgensen, 2010).
22. <http://en.louisiana.dk/exhibition/olafur-eliasson>
23. A more in-depth tracing of this lineage can be found in Grynsztejn 2007.
24. For more on these works in relation to cinema see Trodd 2008, p. 375.
25. Mondloch 2010, p. 26.
26. Eliasson in the exhibition catalogue 2014, p. 56.
27. Balsom 2013, p. 51.
28. Eliasson in the exhibition catalogue 2014, p. 86.
29. Bishop 2004, p. 65.
30. D. Birnbaum does offer a reading of Eliasson's work in relation to the theories presented by Bourriaud in Grynsztejn 2007, pp. 131-143.
31. Eliasson in the exhibition catalogue 2014, p. 89.

## About the author

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## David Reeb: Traces of Things to Come

Leshu Torchin

On 30 May 2014 the Tel Aviv Museum opened the exhibition *Traces of Things to Come* featuring the Israeli artist David Reeb.<sup>32</sup> On the heels of this opening came the 10<sup>th</sup> Tel Aviv International Colloquium of Cinema and Television Studies, titled *Cinematic Traces of Things to Come* and focused on the mediation of impossible pasts and possible futures. Although not affiliated with the conference the exhibition crystallised and illustrated its preoccupations. Meanwhile, Operation Protective Edge was poised to begin in July that year. This military crackdown on Hamas in response to the kidnapping and murder of three Israeli citizens caused pro-