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Take your time: Olafur Eliasson

San Francisco Museum of Modern Art
San Francisco, CA
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A buzzing electric fan is suspended by a thin wire that glints sharply as it swings in drastic, erratic arcs through the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art's soaring foyer. Visitors to *Olafur Eliasson: Take your time* duck, run, laugh and shudder as they are greeted by this self-propelled office relic, which is at once ridiculous and menacing as it dive-bombs the public headspace. *Ventilator* (1997) opens the show, though its violent arabesque has been circumscribed for the survey to a few feet above its original shoulder height, a gesture that disarms the piece. Still, this rebellious enigma elicits a range of responses, proceeding from anxiety to bravado, which foreshadows the experiential scope offered by the show.

Here, viewers are posited as participants and beguiled into pleasure seeking and play. They can expect to be turned yellow, to be rained on, and to walk through a kaleidoscope. There will be more than one opportunity to experience vertigo. Tapping theories about the liberation of desire as radical practice, *Take your time* seeks to awaken viewers' agency by providing what Eliasson calls "devices for the experience of reality." The show's catalog describes the political potential implicit in this experience as an invitation "not only to actively shape your experience of the show, but also to assume greater responsibility for your present and future role in personal and civic life."

Eliasson's well-known, operatic constructions of artificial nature are consciously designed to stimulate agency, to encourage viewers to act upon desire. These contrived yet alluring settings usually give something, such as light, scent or heat, which prompts a similarly generous engagement by the viewer. This dynamic reflects the artist's exploitation of the societal association between nature and playful creativity. As children, many receive the imperative to "go outside and play." In the Western psyche, the outdoors are the kingdom of the imagination, an ever-expanding horizon of possibility in which the id might be given free reign to *yawp*. Eliasson seems to want to bring these outdoors in and foment such



OLAFUR ELIASSON, *Ventilator*, 1997. ALTERED FAN WITH CABLE; DIMENSIONS VARIABLE. COLLECTIONS OF PETER NORTON AND EILEEN HARRIS NORTON. SANTA MONICA, CALIFORNIA. INSTALLATION VIEW AT SAN FRANCISCO MUSEUM OF MODERN ART ON THE OCCASION OF *Take your time: Olafur Eliasson*; PHOTO: IAN REEVES, COURTESY SFMOMA; © 2007 OLAFUR ELIASSON.

radical play, and to thus occupy the institutional space and subvert its prescribed behaviors.

In *Notion motion* (2005), visitors enter a darkened room illuminated only by a dusky projection of rippling water on the surface of a pool. The space echoes with the creaking of gently seesawing floorboards which make low, rusty cries under the steps of visitors. The



attention of the viewer is initially consumed by bodily awareness. With each step, the soft falling and settling of weight is reminiscent the experience of walking over a buoyed harbor dock. However, as more intrepid or antagonistic visitors begin to test the limits of the environment by bouncing more vigorously from one plank to another, louder creaks and squeals reverberate throughout the room. At this point, the projection begins to tremble with almost seismic register as bolder and more rapid waves ripple in tandem with the activity on the floor.

This interactivity suggests the dynamic of an avatar navigating a "virtual reality." Initially a disembodied vessel, an avatar is embodied by an individual so that its environment may be performed through his or her actions. Eliasson reproduces such a dynamic in order to emphasize the required complicity of the viewer in the production of the work's meaning. As in a virtual reality, even though the mechanism by which the viewer operates *Notion motion* is obscure, her crucial role in operating it is accentuated.

Pointedly, the room following *Notion motion* is simply its inversion, revealing the water-filled pool, a few wires, and the projector that constitute its previously hidden mechanism. Through this inversion, the viewer's participation with the work is demystified, and virtuality's basis in the concrete is affirmed. *Notion motion* is a demonstration of how Eliasson encourages the viewer to recognize the reality of each individual's action even in the alienating sphere of contemporary society. The political implication here seems to be a directive from the artist to throw off the paralysis of spectatorship and to realize and actively practice agency.

In *Beauty* (1993), a soft mist lit to a fine radiance descends ethereally from the ceiling of a darkened room. Visitors cluster around the walls, breathing in the moist air and watching the fine spray of water as it falls in waves to the floor. From a classically Minimalist perspective, *Beauty* brings the viewer into the present. Awareness of breath, of skin, and of the permeability of body and environment are heightened. Encouraged by

this generous presence, a few visitors approach the work. Some dip a hand into its concentrated body, while others dare to walk through it completely. Desire is roused and liberated at once.

Within an institutional setting, this apparent liberation of desire initially appears transgressive. Visitors engage physically and playfully with their environment, creating an active atmosphere that is a departure from the usual somberness of a museum. It is this apparent transgression that constitutes Eliasson's radical agency. However, because the desires being liberated are directly aroused by the deliberate manipulations of the exhibition itself, they cannot actually be transgressive. Since this transgression



OLAFUR ELIASSON, *Notion motion*, 2005. HMI SPOTLIGHTS, TRIPODS, WATER, PROJECTION FOIL, WOOD, NYLON, AND SPONGE; DIMENSIONS VARIABLE. MUSEUM BOIJMANS VAN BEUNINGEN, ROTTERDAM, ON LOAN FROM THE HF MECENAAT. INSTALLATION VIEW AT SAN FRANCISCO MUSEUM OF MODERN ART ON THE OCCASION OF *Take your time: Olafur Eliasson*; PHOTO: IAN REEVES, COURTESY SFMOMA; © 2007 OLAFUR ELIASSON.

engendered by Eliasson's work is mostly of an aesthetic nature, the agency of the viewer is actually neutralized rather than radicalized.

This neutralized agency resembles that of the embodied avatar, restricted to predictable and appropriate responses to

OLAFUR ELIASSON, *One-way colour tunnel*, 2007. STAINLESS STEEL, COLOR-EFFECT ACRYLIC, AND ACRYLIC MIRROR; 100 3/4 X 70 7/8 X 413 3/8 INCHES (256 X 180 X 1,050 CM). COURTESY THE ARTIST; TANYA BONAKDAR GALLERY, NEW YORK; AND NEUGERRIEMSCHEIDER, BERLIN. INSTALLATION VIEW AT SAN FRANCISCO MUSEUM OF MODERN ART ON THE OCCASION OF *Take your time: Olafur Eliasson*; PHOTO: IAN REEVES, COURTESY SFMOMA; © 2007 OLAFUR ELIASSON.



OLAFUR ELIASSON. *Beauty*, 1993. FRESNEL LAMP, WATER, NOZZLES, HOSE, WOOD, AND PUMP; DIMENSIONS VARIABLE. MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART, LOS ANGELES, PURCHASED WITH FUNDS PROVIDED BY PAUL FRANKEL. INSTALLATION VIEW AT SAN FRANCISCO MUSEUM OF MODERN ART ON THE OCCASION OF *Take your time: Olafur Eliasson*; PHOTO: IAN REEVES, COURTESY SFMOMA; © 2007 OLAFUR ELIASSON.

prompts embedded in an environment. In the exhibition, interactivity is not creative, it is prescribed: it expresses the pre-coded meaning of the constructed environment. Though his environments are concrete, Eliasson inadvertently virtualizes agency. Although exhorted by the artist to *Take your time* and engage authentically and thoughtfully, the artwork actually discourages inappropriate responses. This discouragement is augmented within an institutional context where authority is ever present. In *Beauty*, docents direct viewers not to linger in the mist. An orderly line corrals visitors awaiting their one-minute allotment inside *Space Reversal* (2007), a mirrored promontory overlooking the city in which the viewer's reflection infinitely recedes. These and any number of other imperatives to touch or not touch, enter or wait, look but don't loiter all prioritize legal and social protocols, and suppress an authentic, imaginative engagement with the work.

The relational structure of the avatar in virtual reality is also problematic in its centralization. Its coerced whims and pleasures (those prescribed, appropriate responses) are alone central to, and indeed drive the work. As in a virtual reality, the desires of non-viewers in the environment are marginalized and delegitimized. The hierarchical dynamic is certainly problematic within Eliasson's oeuvre, ostensibly designed to induce radically democratic participation.

Moss Wall (1994) discourages such progressive engagement in this way. In this piece, an exotic, vast sheet of living reindeer moss is installed over a wall's entirety. The viewer is seduced by its sweet, animal scent and subtly blushing and paling complexion. However, as in any traditional Western seduction, the object allures through its opacity and obscurity. Within such a relationship, any expressive agency it might have as a desiring, creative, relational being is silenced by decontextualization. While it's problematic to speak in terms of a plant's desire, it is perhaps more so not to consider it at all. The marginalization of desire itself is at stake. Here, "nature" is thus deployed as a signifier stimulating creative agency. However, it remains merely aesthetic, never surmounting its "otherness." In this manner, *Moss Wall* inadvertently reproduces, rather

than subverts, the traditionally oppressive modes of relation between subject and object, or self and other.

The insistence on a centralized field of experience is reinforced and expanded within *Model Room* (2003). This site affects an archive ambiance, preserving and displaying the theoretical and technical procedures of the artist. Delicate models of orbs and fractals in crystalline permutations express complex and exact calculations undertaken by Eliasson. Assorted shelves are neat, but with the precise degree of clutter to suggest the labor of a beautiful mind. The atmosphere of the environment is diorama-like. It feels like a meticulously reconstructed workspace functioning, perhaps unintentionally, as a coherent piece in itself. The subject of this piece is its implied master. It is a revelation of the ultimately central subject—the artist—who is empowered to determine and ascribe stable meanings to the objectified field of his work. His omnipotence in ordering our experience paradoxically undermines his objective to stimulate the viewer's agency in producing meaning.

Olafur Eliasson is an empiricist medium. Through a process of divination, he provides "devices for the experience of reality" purportedly to awaken an alienated and apathetic audience. Unfortunately, as his own agency in generating these experiences expands, the agency of the viewer contracts to the point of virtuality. Throughout this exhibition, the desire of the viewer is calculatedly engendered. Moreover, its response is anticipated, surveilled and controlled. Because the visitor's *participation* is prescribed and pre-coded, *participation* is a fallacy. Satiated by false agency, the viewer suppresses any radical impulses. Political agency must not be understood as this kind of coerced cooperation. Instead, it must be a practice claiming criticality, subversion, and even refusal among its prerogatives. Otherwise, the political artwork remains a harmless monster shouting empty threats from above, its own agency reduced to the dramatic posturing of neutralized dissent.¹

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1. The term "harmless monster" can be attributed to Octavio Paz, who first used it in his 1963 essay, "Price and Meaning." [*Essays on Mexican Art* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1993), 292.] Paz argues that the success of an artist depends on complicity with marketing and institutional demands. Under these conditions, political dissent is reduced to "novelty that is mass-produced" and rebellion that does not scare anyone. "Price and Meaning" foreshadows contemporary arguments for the potency of artistic dissent that remains possible only outside traditional economic and institutional models. More than forty years after its publication, it seems fitting to apply the term to Olafur Eliasson's *Take your time*, yet another project that fails in its objective to liberate political agency in part because it must concede to the legal and social requirements of the institution.