



A SPACE WITHOUT BEGINNING AND END

Olafur Eliasson

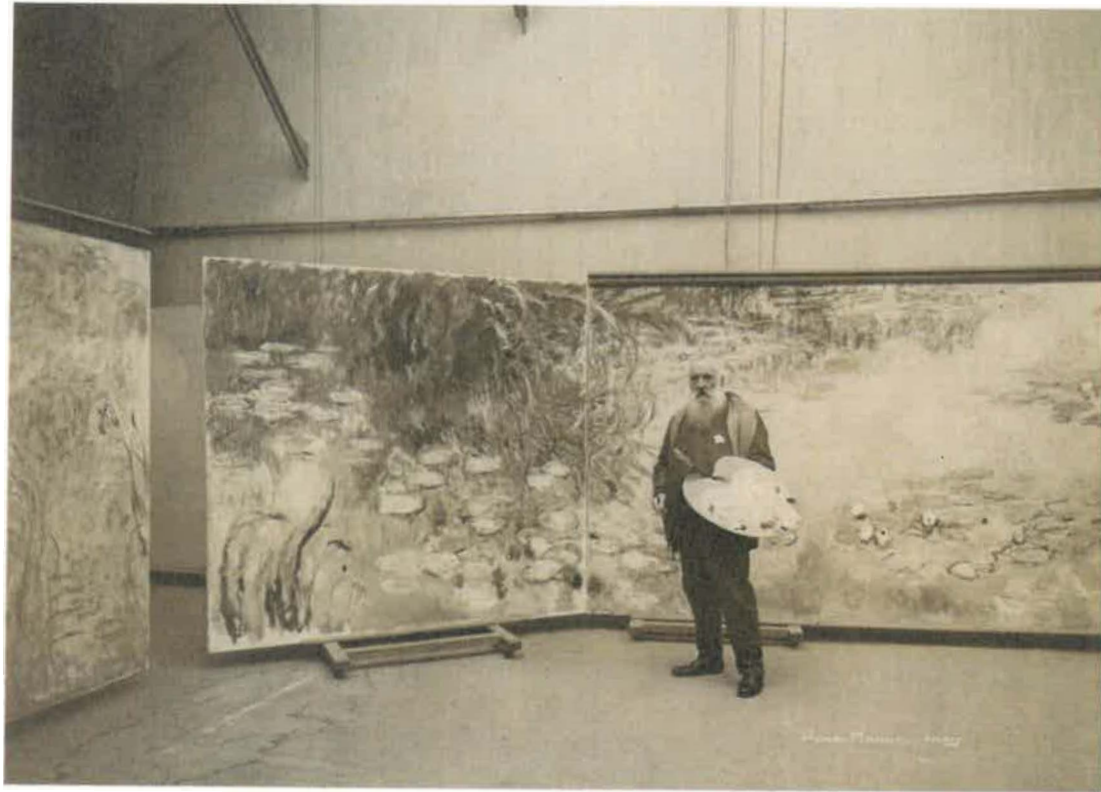
In 1989, I traveled to New York with the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts. I clearly recall encountering Monet's water-lily paintings in the lobby at the Museum of Modern Art and being struck by how the three paintings of the triptych, installed contiguously at an angle, defied the orthogonal framework of the museum. As an art student, I found it truly puzzling. Here was a painter who had conceived his paintings as a panoramic display, and the museum had made the effort to meet the spatial demands of his artwork. This seemed oddly calming, deeply satisfying.

While working in his studio, Monet experimented with large-scale water-lily canvases, placed at an angle. What made him decide to transform these canvases from a two-dimensional plane to three-dimensional space in the first place?

An expansive example of his space-shaping paintings is found in the Musée de l'Orangerie in Paris, where eight curving canvases were installed according to Monet's specifications in 1927, shortly after his death. The paintings bend the gallery walls to create two all-enveloping, interconnected elliptical spaces. The artworks make the spaces they inhabit explicit; they pull us out of our everyday orthogonal frameworks.

As a viewer, you're enveloped by and immersed in the flickering of light and the colors of the gardens in Giverny and the sky above. No longer an I/eye, your body is pushed to move around the spaces; looking becomes embodied, a "sensorimotor activity." I borrow this term from Evan Thompson, a philosopher who asks, "How does one's lived body relate to the world, and how does it relate to itself?"¹ Walking through the Orangerie galleries in my

Olafur Eliasson
Colour experiment no. 109, 2020
Oil on canvas
diam. 44½ in. (113 cm)
Courtesy the artist;
Tanya Bonakdar Gallery,
New York / Los Angeles;
neugerriemschneider, Berlin



Claude Monet in front of his *Water Lilies* paintings in his studio at Giverny
Gelatin silver print by Henri Manuel, 1920

imagination, I try to intuit how my lived body relates to the water lilies and how they, in turn, make me turn my gaze inward to understand how I relate to that same lived body. The paintings *take place* in between these axes of perception and reflection.

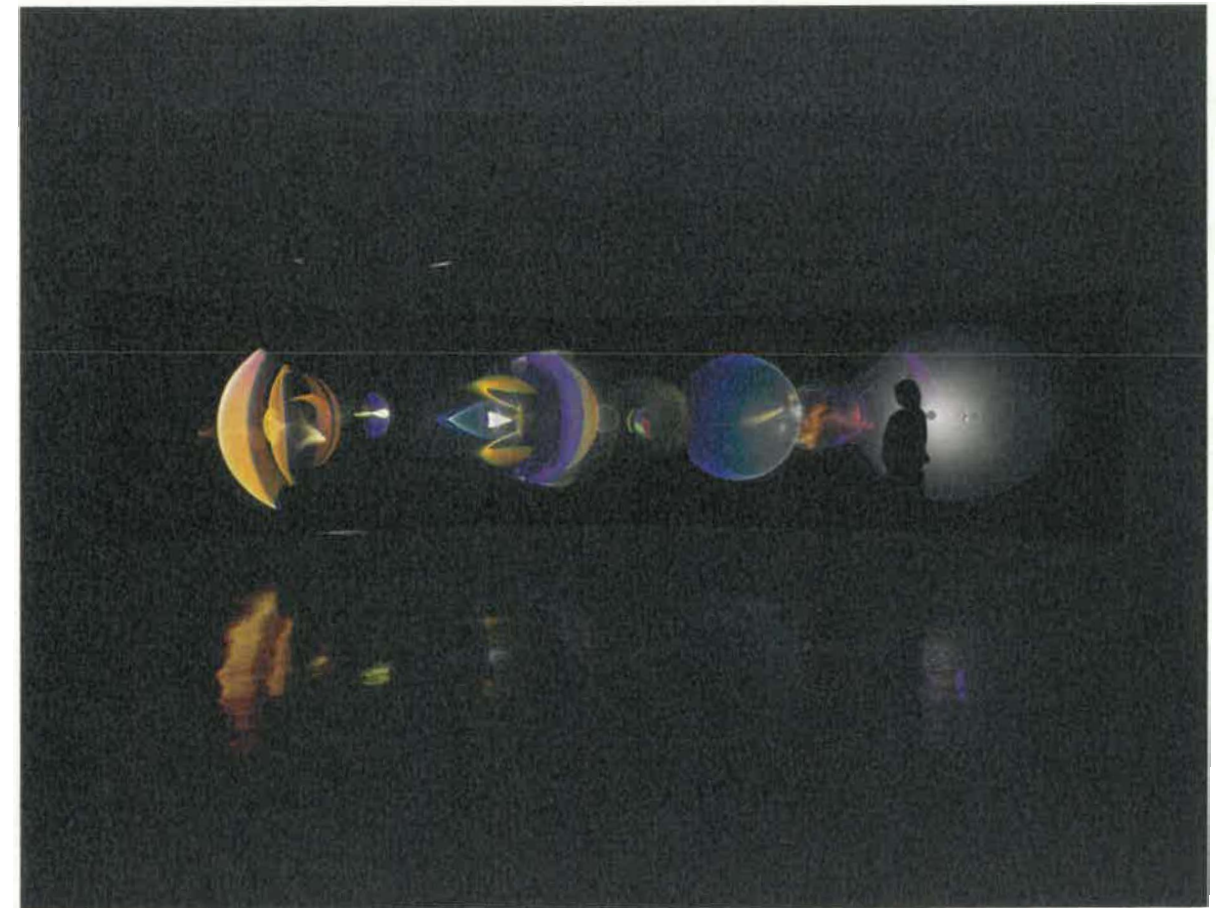
Monet painted his Orangerie water lilies right after World War I. Did he hope to denumbify viewers who were marked by recent memories of war? To resensitize them to the ephemeral changes of daylight and landscapes? The paintings cycle through the different times of day, and you, as an embodied viewer, can leap across time zones, speed up the passing of the hours, by walking alongside the artworks, from sunrise to sunset, entering a multidimensional mode of looking/perceiving/moving/reflecting in a critique of how central perspective and orthogonal lines organize space.

In my own work, I welcome the fuzziness of the passing of time, the blurring of dimensions—not as a loss of control or binary opposition to metric, clearly parsed activities, but as an untelling of the modern grid, a welcoming

of the presence of the body and the work the body does. In 2021, the water lilies and their radical spatial organization came back to me when I made *Your ocular relief*, a large-scale curved projection first shown in New York, at the Tanya Bonakdar Gallery. The artwork emerges in slow transformations of colored light filtered through leftover lenses, mirrors, color-effect filters, and prisms. Visitors to the gallery would stand still and watch attentively, as if in a cinema, or else move along the curve. For me, the best way to experience any work of art is with an awareness of the sensorimotor activities involved in meeting up with that artwork.

Vétheuil in Winter, painted by Monet long before the Orangerie series, is the mark of an artist on a journey from figurative painting—which he never fully left—toward abstraction. The layer of snow erases the details of the

Olafur Eliasson,
Your ocular relief, 2021
Projection screen, aluminum stands, LED projectors with optical components, lens enclosures with integrated motors, electrical ballasts, control units
Dimensions variable
Private collection



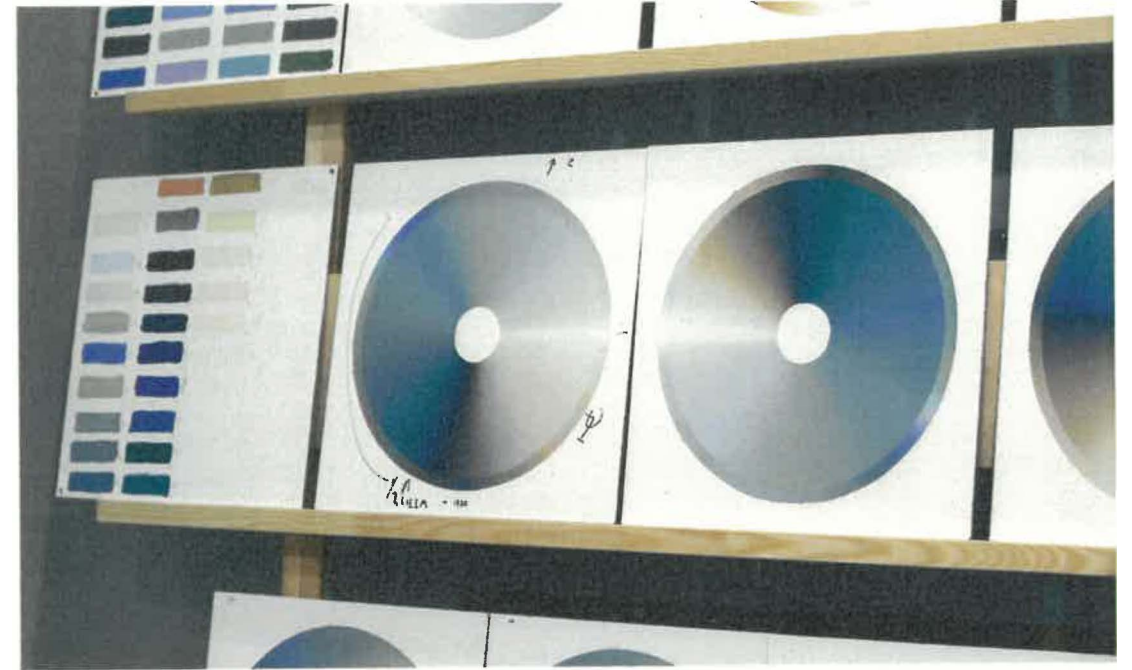
landscape, enveloping it in a bluish white blanket. Sometimes I wonder: Is it water I see? Light reflections? Snow? Did Monet wander about, measuring the landscape through his body? Was his seeing based on sensorimotor activity too? What kind of seeing did he, in fact, leave as traces on the canvas before sending it off into the future?

To me, a landscape is always about more than itself. It's about my relationship with it, about how I use my body, my muscles, sensations, and physical movement to get to know it, to grasp its depth, to record the changes that occur from one minute to the next. When I walk through the Icelandic highlands, for example, a landscape that feels local to me, and measure its depth with my movement, walking becomes not only about my relationship with that specific place but with the earth and the consequences of my footprint on it, my living on it, as a part of it.

Over the years, I've gradually turned from phenomenology to reading, among others, the anthropologist and philosopher Bruno Latour, whose actor-network and lucid ecological thinking inspires me greatly. Latour suggests that we should see ourselves as "earthbound" and get "down to Earth," in order to understand and deal with the ecological crisis we're in today.² For Latour, like many others, we are not separate from nature—we *are* nature. Any attempt to pull nature and culture apart is a futile endeavor, left over from modernist ambitions, that will further the ecological damage that we have created and are grappling to curb. This entanglement is what the biologist and feminist philosopher Donna Haraway calls *natureculture*. She asks, "What gets to count as nature? For whom and when? How much [does it cost] to produce nature at a particular moment in history for a particular group of people?"³

Let's send a question back in time to Monet, then. Let's offer him a letter from the future: Claude, what counts as nature for you? Do you detect a sense of agency or intentionality in the many layers of ephemera before you? What do you, in fact, see? A force in things, in the houses, the church placed to dominate the cluster of houses beneath it, the waters of the Seine, its shores, the trees and the vegetation—a force arising from the dynamic relationships *between them*? (In her *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, Jane Bennett calls this "the curious ability of inanimate things to animate, to act, to produce effects dramatic and subtle."⁴)

Monet's impressionist response to my question, traveling up through the twentieth century, arrives today at The Frick Collection. His emphasis on the



ephemeral qualities of light and the weather invite my abstract narrative into *Vetheuil in Winter* to coexist with his. Instead of listening to the legacy of his paintings, built up over the years—the popularization of his motifs, the water lilies in hotel rooms and lobbies—instead of following my own historically conditioned gaze, I look at how matter is solid, liquid, ethereal, and lucid in *Vetheuil in Winter*, at the daylight bouncing off the snow. And what I see is shimmering light and colors. I see the relationships among colors. What makes this painting so extraordinary to me is how the colors vibrate or wiggle in relation to each other.

I embark on the journey of abstraction, lifting the colors from their objects, their places, and making them the protagonists of an abstract color space. I focus on the immaterial aspects that cannot be easily quantified. This is the beginning of my *Colour experiment no. 109*.

In a sense, removing the subject matter continues a process that Monet himself had explored. Before him, painters like Turner had already begun shifting away from narrative, from representing places and objects, and from strict adherence to the rules of perspective, toward a greater emphasis on atmosphere, lighting, and weather conditions. What are the consequences

Colour experiment no. 109
in development
Studio Olafur Eliasson,
Berlin, 2018–19

of this “ephemeralization” of the narrative that Turner and, after him, the Impressionists advocated? The viewers are positioned as co-producers of the artwork. Their subconscious is invited into the painting. The works open up to the viewers’ own interpretations, to incorporate other stories into the picture.

The journey present in *Colour experiment no. 109*, from Vétheuil to abstract color space, unfolds around an unframed circle. I’m drawn to circles, whether I’m working on an installation or on a pedestrian bridge for the Copenhagen harbor, because the circle removes any point of clear orientation and direction for the viewer, negating traditional rules of composition, representation, and perspective. A circle organizes space in a very different way from that of a square or a rectangle. Viewed from the center of a perfectly flat plane, the horizon extends around us uninterrupted, not a line but a circle. The circular canvas contains only one hierarchical point: its center. That is why, in *Colour experiment no. 109*, there is no painting at the center, only a void. Without the center, your eye likely travels around the unframed edges. You go on an ocular journey, engaged in a condensed type of sensorimotor activity. This adds a temporal quality to the painting. The time it takes for you to look at the painting becomes a part of its story. There is no clear start, no end. We will never finish looking. And what we see cannot be un-seen.

Opening up the work for whatever you project into it removes the authority of the artist—my authority: it is up to you to finish the color narrative. I celebrate the non-directional attention that you may bring to contemplating the painting, being with it, and *of* it.

And while feeling present in its presence, in this abstract color landscape, you may find yourself going back to other landscapes too, to relationships between things, beings—human and non-human—and natural cultural sites that, so much more unruly than a color wheel, are pulsing and teeming with life.

Since 2009, Olafur Eliasson has produced a large number of paintings collectively known as the Colour experiments. Painted on round canvases, often with holes at the center, these paintings suggest alternative color wheels to those taught in schools. For Colour experiment no. 109, a color-calibrated photograph was made of Monet’s Vétheuil in Winter, which resulted in a high-quality print that was sent to Studio Olafur Eliasson, in Berlin. Eliasson and the painter Sylvain Brugier then abstracted the palette from the subject matter, spreading the colors out onto the surface of the round canvas in a gradient color wheel, transitioning from dark to light. The circumference of Eliasson’s painting is large enough to contain the original painting by Monet, embracing it within the color wheel. The artwork was two years in the making.

Notes

Thompson 2007, 245.

2 See, for example, Latour 2018.

3 From “Donna Haraway Reads *The National Geographic* on Primates,” 1987, video; <https://vimeo.com/218047623>.

4 Bennett 2009, 6.