

24 October 2022

سفر الظلال في بحر النهار

(Shadows travelling on the sea of the day), 2022

ARTISTIC STATEMENT by Olafur Eliasson:

*Shadows travelling on the sea of the day* is reached by driving through the rugged desert landscape, northwards from Doha, past Fort Zubarah and the village of Ain Mohammed. You may already glimpse the artwork from afar, situated on the horizon like a small informal settlement or industrial site. When you finally approach the artwork on foot, the uncertainty of what you are in fact seeing may stay with you a little while longer. The landscape – a vast, sandy plane dotted with desert plants, traces of animals, and rock formations – extends around you for many kilometres in all directions. Perhaps the shimmering line of the horizon is the artwork's outer limit.

Yet it is not only *you* who have journeyed to meet up with the artwork. Its cool, hospitable shadows travel slowly across the sandy ground during the day and more rapidly at dusk and dawn. Above you, in the ceilings fitted with large mirrors, you may also – with the right amount of patience – detect these cyclical journeys.

Looking up, you come to realise that you are, in fact, looking down – at the earth and at yourself. Above and below, sand envelops you, together with anyone else sharing the space. To test what you see, you might extend an arm and wave to yourself or wiggle a foot while looking at your reflection. It is a kind of reality check of your connectedness to the ground. You are at once standing firmly on the sand *and* hanging, head down, from a ground that is far above you. You will probably switch back and forth between a first-person perspective and a destabilising, third-person point of view of yourself. This oscillation of the gaze, together with the movement of your body, amplifies your sense of presence, while the curving structures seem to vanish into the surroundings, dematerialising and becoming landscape.

If you look at the clusters of sculptural elements unfolding left and right, you may notice a quite extraordinary effect: the array of mirrors connects and perfects what is physically distinct and partial. The mirrors each reflect their own semicircular support, completing them into perfect circles. The *neighbouring* mirrors reflect the steel structures as well, creating a sea of interconnections. Reflection becomes virtual composition, changing as you move. What you perceive – an entanglement of landscape, sprawling sculptural elements, and visitors – seems hyperreal while still completely grounded.

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I hope you will become sensitised to the surroundings as you meander beneath the shady mirrors. Walking slowly – without the protection of a fast-moving, airconditioned vehicle – you may be able to take in a landscape that is not barren and empty but comprises desert animals, plants, and human beings; stories, traditions, and cultural artefacts; wind, glaring sunlight, thick air, and shimmering heat; semicircles and rings; traces and tracks; and curiosity, fatigue, and wonder. *Shadows travelling on the sea of the day* is a celebration of all that is here; of everything moving through the space at the time of your visit, of your presence within this naturalcultural landscape. It is an invitation to resync with the planet.

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CONTEXT STATEMENT by Olafur Eliasson:

Over the course of my working life as an artist, I have always been a strong believer in collaboration and dialogue. I think art offers a rare opportunity for people from a wide range of backgrounds to share a space while acknowledging differences of opinion and of values.

I have approached diverging points of view – or even potential conflicts – in two ways: through the conversations, some public, some private, that I have with commissioners, curators, and collaborators on accepting and developing projects, and directly through my artworks and the conceptual thinking surrounding them. This approach has also led me to address topics such as cross-cultural collaboration and the climate emergency as a UN Goodwill Ambassador and, formerly, as a member of the high-level round table for the New European Bauhaus. The climate crisis presents us with a daunting task, especially because most people in Western or developed countries, myself included, continue to participate in capitalist, extractive systems that disrupt Earth's ecosystems and threaten the lives of millions, both humans and other species.

For me, working in Qatar has meant entering into a context where I am confronted with values that are different from my own – sometimes radically so. I adamantly believe in the right of everyone to express themselves freely, in particular with regard to their gender and sexual orientation, and I am a strong believer in upholding human rights, as outlined by the UN. Entering into a work collaboration in Qatar, I am careful, as an outsider and as a European, about how I can best support these values, aware as I am of the legacy of European colonialism in the Middle East. I continue to be guided by my ideals in my artistic work, and throughout the installation of *Shadows travelling on the sea of the day* my team has been dedicated to ensuring that all human rights standards were upheld on the building site.

I first worked in Qatar in 2017. At the time, Little Sun – my project to bring solar energy to people living without reliable access to electricity – hosted workshops about sustainability and solar power as part of a presentation of Little Sun lamps at Fire Station, Doha, a space for contemporary art.

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*Shadows travelling on the sea of the day* was commissioned almost a decade ago and has taken four years to produce. Why did I engage to begin with? I was fascinated by the vast and vulnerable desert landscape and interested in the possibility to work outside Western cultures. I focused on the making of a permanent artwork, its life expanding far beyond a month of football. There is no artistic connection between my sculpture and the FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022. Why do I continue to believe in that engagement? In the past decade, mainstream awareness of the need for climate action, and my own awareness of it, have developed significantly. Due to its location, Qatar is predicted to be hard hit by the consequences of climate change, including rising sea levels and increased temperatures. It is a signatory of the Paris Agreement and, in 2021, signed the Global Methane Pledge to reduce methane emissions by 30% in 2030. Yet the wealth of the country primarily comes from the export of oil and liquified natural gas, the latter of which is now being imported by Europe at an even higher level than before. This is a highly complex geo-political situation from which we cannot simply extricate ourselves.

The climate crisis requires collective action across nations and cultures and, hence, an unprecedented level of international cooperation. It is my modest belief that art and cultural projects such as my own can help cultivate the necessary transcultural understanding to tackle this enormous task. Art can act as a conduit for dialogue and for listening. In the best of cases it may also move people to action.

Unlike climate activism, for instance, art is often slow and circuitous. *Shadows travelling on the sea of the day* invites reflection on how we can rebuild relationships with the planet; how we can create new narratives for transitioning to different ways of being on and caring for Earth. It offers embodied experiences and space for self-reflection while providing an opportunity to share one's experiences with others across communities and cultures.

There is also an operational side to art making. Art is produced; art is shipped to locations worldwide; art is installed and de-installed again. The production and dissemination of art is important to examine. Since 2020, my studio's sustainability team has tracked all stages of art making, including improving waste management, reducing travel, and tracking carbon footprints, to define ways of investing in sustainable practices. For *Shadows travelling on the sea of the day*, we are working with an external company to cross-check the calculation of its carbon footprint, from

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which we will allocate funds from the project budget to support local environmental groups that work to preserve the delicate environment in Qatar.

Rooted in my own experiences trying to make my studio practice more sustainable, I look forward to continuing the dialogue that my artwork begins on sustainability and climate action with the teams at Qatar Museums.