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Olafur Eliasson: Visionary Events.

One has to be very light to drive one's will to knowledge into such a distance and, as it were, beyond one's time, to create for oneself eyes to survey millennia and, moreover, clear skies in those eyes. One must have liberated oneself from many things that oppress, inhibit, hold down, and make heavy precisely us Europeans today. The human being of such a beyond who wants to behold the supreme measures of value of his time must first of all "overcome" this time in himself this is the first test of his strength and consequently not only his time but also his prior aversion and contradiction against this time, his suffering from this time, his untimeliness, his romanticism.

Nietzsche

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Much current art practice, in these fin-de-siècle years, seems caught between two equally restricted avenues of development. One is appropriate to this particular historical moment of decadence, in which art is posed as an activity that perpetuates itself by playing out its own exhaustion. It becomes an endless recycling and reappropriating the flux of myriad cultural signs and gestures, while simultaneously fashioning an ironic and self-reflective relation to already discarded aesthetic strategies. The other major arena of activity is perhaps more suited to the symbolically weighted passage into a new century and new millennium: art shakes off older and obsolete paradigms to engage a new technological pragmatics of information and communication within electronic networks and image processing systems. Of these two paths

(which of course overlap at times), the latter might superficially seem to be more affirmative in its assumptions about the possibilities for cultural and aesthetic creation, and during the past five years or more we have heard many times how new electronic media is dramatically expanding the limits and possibilities of human perception, through a wide range of new machinic and prosthetic capabilities. For many, the vast possibilities of digital imagery and global telematics signal the opening of a new historical regime of visibility and of aesthetic experience. But curiously there has been little questioning or critical challenge to the many extravagant and often dubious claims being made about cyberspace today. Instead there has been a generally passive and obedient acceptance of the idea that significant cognitive and perceptual innovations will inevitably be within the wired terrain of cyberspace, computer graphics and communication systems.

In this present cultural context, it is important to see that there are provocative alternative practices outside these two general sets of options which I have sketched above. At this historical threshold, it is vitally important to insist that the reinvention of subjective experience can in fact occur outside of the dominant institutional practices and modalities that are increasingly posed in terms of their universality and necessity. Clearly, the work of an artist like Olafur Eliasson can be understood as staking out in a crucial way a kind of third path. Eliasson's work is exemplary of thinking which believes in the importance of expanding and exploring human perceptual capacities

but which pursues such experimentation independently of any contemporary technological imperatives. What is at stake now is the very meaning of the idea of the “visionary” and of creativity. Since the end of the nineteenth century there has been an acceleration of the transfer of various functions of human knowledge and perception into a wide range of information and image machines. It is part of a larger historical process in which the texture of thought, memory and sensory experience has been reshaped and externalized by its increasing embeddedness in powerful technological systems of many kinds. It was once thought that modernity was characterized by the separation and autonomy of the spheres of art, science and ethics. Now as Jean-François Lyotard and others have observed technoscience is becoming a new master paradigm which is increasingly determining the nature of art, knowledge, politics, morality and community.

But significantly, even amid the installation of such a paradigm and related processes of global homogenization, marginal and alternative spaces of innovation and experiment flourish. I refer not to any attempts to return to some impossibly pre-modern or supposedly “natural” conditions of subjective experience, but rather to work founded on a richer and more imaginative conception of what machines are capable of and a far more probing investigation of how various technical (in the richest sense of this word) procedures and interventions have the potential for transforming and enhancing human perception. Eliasson’s art, from a certain perspective, might seem to be about the evocation of phenomena derived from what we used to refer to as Nature: mist, waves, atmosphere, rainbows, arctic moss, and so

on. But what is crucial about his work is that these elements are only partial components of a larger machinic set-up. That is, his pieces cannot be understood in terms of a distinction between a biosphere on one hand and a mechanosphere on the other. Instead a nature/culture duality is dissolved within a single field in which machine and organism are not separable. Thus it would be a mistake to find anything nostalgic in his work; rather it is grounded in a historical understanding that “visionary” experiences have always been the product of various technical procedures and material practices, that “nature” is never apprehendable in some pure state but is always mediated or incorporated through practices of use, ritual, observation, and assimilation. Eliasson’s work must be seen as part of a counter-tradition of machinic production in which the dominant contemporary values of storage, speed, productivity, uniformity are discarded in favor of techniques for the creation of singular and non-recordable phenomena. It also implies a willingness to combine contemporary technological options with recourse to what Lewis Mumford called the “eotechnic” era, that period from the middle ages to the 1700s, marked by a balance between culture and technics, by the use of wind and water power, of the garden, simple optical instruments like the telescope, a period when the world experienced “the greatest dilation of the senses”. But if there was an efflorescence of sensory life during that historical period, the subsequent onset of the paleotechnic era, or industrial revolution, coincided with an escalating mechanization and most often an impoverishment of human perception. By the late nineteenth century there were a diversity of responses in both art and philosophy to the

general standardization and automation of perceptual response brought about by modernized forms of mechanical reproduction and communication. The philosopher Henri Bergson is exemplary of many who attempted a revitalization of perception in the face of the redundant forms of spectacular consumption of mass culture. Crucial for Bergson was a subjectivity capable of continually renewing and extending its perceptual limits, as a way of resisting the habitual and deadening patterns within an emerging mass culture, patterns which certainly have their contemporary parallels in the most pervasive uses of televisions and personal computers, and the forms of quasi-automatic behavior which they induce. As an antidote, Bergson deliriously attempted to map out an intuition that was able to grasp the manifold vibrations and uninterrupted becoming of the world. In a sense, the issue was and continues to be the nature of "novelty", that is, what does the experience of the "new" mean within a social/economic environment founded on the continual production and consumption of novelty. A bit earlier in the nineteenth century John Ruskin sought in a related way to outline the exercise of heightened visual attentiveness that would override any routinized forms of perception, that would be capable of apprehending both the natural world and the aesthetic artifacts of human beings in terms of an infinite cascade of self-differentiation, a world that was continually recreating itself, that was never inert or fully self-present. Now, at a time when the idea of "virtual reality" is indifferently associated with innovation and creative possibilities, it is important to insist on a more precise sense of what "virtual" means: following the philosopher Gilles Deleuze, the virtual designates that

which is not yet seeable, explainable, representable in terms of already existing concepts or expectations. Thus the actualization of the virtual must involve the creation of invention of the unforeseen, the emergence of an event that is not deductible from the conditions which preceded it. To cite Aldous Huxley: "Our perception of visionary objects possesses all the freshness, all the naked intensity, of experiences which have never been verbalized, never assimilated to lifeless abstractions". Clearly, so-called electronic virtual reality is just the opposite: its synthetic images are fully derivable from algorithms and simulation models which necessarily preclude the disclosure of anything not already formalizable.

In this sense Eliasson's work is about a field of events in which nothing objective is produced, in which conditions are set in play to allow a zone of virtuality to hover at the edge of actualization. It is a question of mobile and non-hierarchized relations between spectator, apparatus and milieu - elements out of which a non-identifiable and non-localizable phenomenon coalesces and subsists. Unlike some of the well-known artists (for example James Turrell) with whom has been associated, Eliasson does not engage in any concealment or mystification of how specific effects are fabricated. In this sense we could term his work anti-phantasmagoric - the word phantasmagoria of course refers back to certain early nineteenth-century magic lantern displays which used back projection and concealed mirrors to keep the audience unaware of the means used to create illusory images. Eliasson's pieces are resolutely transparent in their exposure of the usually simple and straightforward functioning of the machine

components. Thus while there is this distinctly de-mystifying character to the practical and mundane concreteness of these elements, it is paradoxically at odds with the highly evanescent and even sublime effects that these elements produce. The material and the de-materialized co-exist within the same charged field. A horizon of transcendence then is fully embedded in a world of immanence, a world of finitude and from which the absolute implied, for example, in the work of Caspar David Friedrich, Mark Rothko, or Robert Irwin is evacuated. For the neo-romantic Eliasson, transcendence is driven back into the actual world and made to serve an immanent function in terms of the creation of effects, desires, epiphanies and temporalities which are embodied in a social and human world.

If we refer to his work as events, it is also in the sense of a dynamic constellation of occurrences in which temporal experience is reorganized into non-linear rhythms and pulsings and in which spatial experience is freed up from its habitual coordinates of subject/non-subject, interior/exterior, center/periphery to become intensive, shimmering and unanchored. Just as the identity of Nature is problematized, so is the distinctness and autonomy of the perceiving subject. But to say the subject here ceases to be autonomous is not in any way similar to the loss of autonomy due to the increasing integration of the individual into various electronic networks and assemblages. In the latter case it is a question of the ongoing prosthetic subsumption of the nervous system into becoming simply a \_relay or conduit amid larger systems and flows. With Eliasson's work, there is a highly nuanced understanding of the both the subjective (even

physiological) determinants of perception on one hand and the material objective ones on the other. It is work that raises the seemingly anachronistic question: what does it mean to be a visionary at the end of the 20th century? Clearly it is no longer possible to hold with William Blake that it is a solely a matter of the subject's eye turned inward, of the unassailable imaginative sovereignty of the artist. Rather, the visionary experience today can only come out of specific machinic assemblages that engage the body and its capabilities and limits. The body here is not an abstract optical system for a transparent viewing of the world but a charged field of sur\_faces which are simultaneously productive and receptive of sensory experience. Thus there is a need for attention to the many ways in which a body both generates effects at the same time that is the object of effects produced externally by technical intervention (such as the chromatic transformations of \_retinal afterimages, the illusion of stasis during stroboscopic illumination, the disturbance of balance during undulating projections). The body then here is not a closed unity but rather an open, un\_finished set of possibilities, even of possibilities that have yet to be invented. Thus it is a question of a mixed subject, the body as both observer and producer, who is in a continually shifting and kinesthetic relation to a concrete lived milieu. This relation becomes a dynamic system of interdependent, self-adaptive movements, sensations and patterns.

Within the domain of what we might dubiously still refer to as culture, the crucial question ought to be: what kind of reality do we want or need to construct new tools and powers that are at our dis\_posal? For the artist, the stakes are high. The forces and imperatives that pull the



artist into the instrumental terrain of “consumable” media and information products are in many cases overwhelming. It is crucial to make decisions that are at once esthetic and ethical about the social ecologies and subjectivities that it is now possible to “engineer”. In one sense it is possible to see certain aspects of Eliasson’s experimentation in relation to architecture, and one could position him in relation to some earlier architectural practice (for example the ethereality of Paolo Soleri or the pragmatic, “available technology” approach of Buckminster Fuller). However, regardless of the categories one uses, his work does in fact constitute a radical reconception of what it means to inhabit form outside of notions of structure, support or even gravity. He poses various modalities of dematerialization and weightlessness, of evanescent and chromatic phenomena in states of continuous variation. In no sense is this about some ideal immaterial space but rather a liquid groundless space filled with forces, affects and intensities, rather than objects. Italo Calvino discussed the intuition of Lucretius that the emptiness in the universe is just as concrete as the solid bodies scattered through it: “Knowledge of the world tends to dissolve the solidity of the world, leading to a perception of all that is infinitely minute, light and mobile”. For it is the mobility and unpredictability of that minute reality that allows for human freedom and the possibility of the new.

Some of the most compelling aesthetic and conceptual thinking today, such as the work in this exhibition, comes out of an understanding of the patchwork, hybrid consistency of contemporary perceptual experience. For most of us, our

subjective lifeworld is an irreducible mix of disjunct and incompatible events, in which vision can oscillate unpredictably between its embeddedness in the sensory-motor responses of the body and in technological arrangements that (at least in subjective terms), are effectively about disembodiment. The cognitive scientist Francisco Varela has described perception as sequences of what he calls "microworlds", insisting that perception is always about a rhythm of their successive constitution and breakdown. However, contemporary subjective life is more and more a matter of the increased velocity with which we move through a range of externally imposed microworlds and then their abrupt disintegration. The potency and emotional resonance of Elaisson's work is in part to how far removed, how disturbing alien his pieces are from the familiar, expected patterns of quotidian experience, even as his work is situated fully within mundane environments. Nonetheless they constitute excursions or swerves into very different constructed worlds, with unexpected temporalities and speeds (including slow ones), or rhythmic regularities that take one out of linear time altogether. It is by now of course a truism that contemporary urban experience is increasingly a heterogeneous surface on which regions of Euclidian space are contiguous with the uncertain dimensions of telematic and informational environments and various other augmented realities. Thus, all of us within contemporary technological culture today experience the unsettling modulations of a densely sedimented social terrain, in which new distributions, flows, hierarchies but also new cultural vacancies and derelict spaces are generated on a daily basis. It is an environment in which strategies of

living and freedom depend on the construction of novel perceptual syntheses, where novelty and even beauty are outside of a logic of enforced consumption and obsolescence. We live in a world now whose practical and ethical coherence depends on the ability to invent meaningful connections between incommensurable cognitive territories but also on the ability to inhabit creatively the uncertain interstices between these continually mutating zones. Olafur Eliasson's work luminously provides us with evocative models of how such an inhabiting could occur.