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Inside the Spectacle
Gitte Ørskou

The Antispective Situation

Like a gigantic, polished spaceship that has just landed from some remote galaxy, the metallic, crystalline monster stands with its bristling, porcupine-like surface, right there on the room’s marble floor. The site is the Danish Pavilion at the Venice Biennale 2003 and the work is Olafur Eliasson’s *La situazione antispettiva* – the antispective situation. This piece, which is now being exhibited in a new rendition, *Multiple grotto*, at the exhibition entitled *Minding the world* at the ARoS Aarhus Kunstmuseum, was, with its impetuously present materiality and physique, a central work in Eliasson’s exhibition, *The Blind Pavilion,* at the Venice Biennale. The work is a five meters high, five meters wide and 15 meters long ‘grotto’ in polished steel. The grotto is formed of 250 cornet-shaped five- and six-sided ‘kaleidoscopes’ that point *in* toward the figure’s center and *out* toward its external shell.

Contemplated from the outside, the work is a distinct and closed form that allows the kaleidoscopes’ terminal point to serve as the viewer’s point of departure. The bristling apertures offer an invitation to cast a glance in toward the work’s interior space which, in much the manner of a scintillating and glittering techno-version of a stalactite cave, swirls the light from outside and the reflections from the people inside around in one large and aggregate kaleidoscopic centrifuge. The gaze toward the inner space is isolated and situated within the perspective’s source inasmuch as only one person at a time can position his/her eye so that it is turned directly toward the individual kaleidoscope’s aperture.

From inside the work, on the other hand, the viewer quickly comes to lose his/her orientation in an ‘antispective’ collapse: Faces and eyes on the outside of the work force their way through, in a veritable jumble of luminous openings. And through the agency of the steel’s mirror effect, they become multiplied and whirled around in the dazzling space, while the viewer’s own gaze is met by his/her own and the rest of the visitors’ mirror images in unexpected and distorted formations. The spatial orientation, in crucial moments, is put out of action on account of these mirrorings, which cause the bodily mirror image to dematerialize itself into thousands of tiny particles.

Whereas the work, regarded from the outside, is weighty and present, on the inside of the piece, this same materiality is dissolved into the reflections’ endless repetitions of the viewers’ gazes and bodies. Rather than being a physically closed whole, from which the viewer stands at a distance, the grotto constitutes the *frame* around the meeting between people and the outside world, between subject and object – which means to say the swirling together of body and surroundings, which is Eliasson’s fundamental aim. Put more precisely, this is an antispective *situation*, for which he is busy constructing the frames with his artworks, to a greater extent than the work’s ‘own’ qualities are being emphasized.

“Das Ding an Sich”, which was the German philosopher Immanuel Kant’s locution for the utopian idea about things in the world existing independently of the individual human being – that is to say, independently of the subject – is replaced in Eliasson’s grasp by what Kant himself called “das Ding fu¨r Uns” – that is to say, the idea that things in the world only exist *by virtue of* our sensing of them. In the situations that Eliasson interjects into the work, it is actually the viewer and his/her surroundings that are being put into play, more than the object or the thing itself – even when ‘the thing’ is of such overwhelming presence as this mirror-polished steel grotto.

In the Sardine Can’s Glare

In the encounter with the steel grotto’s reflecting kaleidoscopes, my thoughts turned to the French pychoanalyst Jacques Lacan’s renowned and extraordinary ‘sardine can anecdote’, of which he offered an account in the series of seminars in 1964, the contents of which were subsequently published under the title

The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis. During a fishing trip with some of the local fishermen, one of them points toward a sardine can, which is floating around on the surface of the water, reflecting the rays of the sun. Laughing out loud, the fisherman blurts out to the young Lacan: "You see that can? Do you see it? Well, it doesn't see you!" Lacan, however, cannot see anything funny about the situation. As a matter of fact, he does feel 'seen' by the can, not in the manner of an equal exchange of gazes. What he actually feels, instead, is that he is ensnared by the can's indefinable radiance and that he has been reduced to an image for a liquid, glittering and non-localizable gaze. The situation upsets him. The recognition that it is not only he who observes the world but the world is also looking back at him strikes him in a most dramatic way, right there in the fishing boat. The world's gaze in the form of the sardine can's immaterial lightreflection places Lacan under an entirely different gaze than that which falls his way for the most part in his relations with his fellow human beings.

Instead of feeling himself to be 'seen' as a whole and stable individual, he feels instead like a little tiny entity within a splintered totality, engendered by the concentrated light from the gleaming sardine can, which dissolves his identity and his beingness. And he writes: "I see from only one point, but in my existence I am being looked at from all sides."[1] The sensation of instability, of formlessness and the loss of fixed identity accompany the realization that the world is looking back at him.

Lacan makes use of the anecdote from the fishing vessel in order to illustrate his theory of vision, which was unfurled during the very same seminar. Whereas it has been the case since the time of the Renaissance and the advent of perspective-representation that the human eye has been regarded as the source for a stable subject-object-relation, where the human being is the subject and the world is the object, Lacan introduces with his anecdote the reverse situation, where the human being is object and the world is subject.

The gaze, which here regards the human being as object, is for Lacan not the physical eye that observes us when we meet other people, but a luminously radiant, non-localizable gaze that pierces and contains the human being in an object situation, of which it has not obtained control. This uncontrollable situation is accompanied by a sensation that the body is being dissolved, placed under an omniscient gaze, gathered together right here in the little, gleaming sardine can. And one is no longer seeing. Now one is being *seen*.

In his diagram of vision, Lacan places the human subject at the intersection between seeing and being seen. In our ordinary intercourse with the world, we manage to hold this non-localizable gaze at bay through the agency of the many cultural codes out from which we insensibly take action. Similarly, we regard our surroundings on the basis of the very same cultural codex. The situation is stabilized by this double coding and we harbor the illusion that we, the subjects, have control over our world. Up until that moment when, like Lacan, who becomes 'ensnared' by the sardine can's radiance on the glittering surface of the water, we experience ourselves as an insignificant particle in the context of a greater totality.

In the original French, Lacan designates this totality as a *spectacle*. The word can be construed as both a 'vision/sight' and as a 'scene/play'. That is to say, then, that we are both a *part* of a vision, where the world is looking back at us, and are simultaneously *taking part* in a kind of play, engendered by the many cultural codes, out from which we perform our actions. When you are being seen by the omniscient gaze, you are a passive part of the vision, but when you are looking at the world on the basis of the cultural codes you have been taught, you are participating actively in the play.

For Lacan, that which defines the human subject is precisely this both-and: For the most part, you are balancing in a pulsating position between seeing and being seen and only seldom is the balance upset by 'the world's gaze', as materialized in the sardine can's reflection. In the meeting with Eliasson's grotto, on the contrary, you are defined by an either-or. You are either seeing or being seen and you are therefore capable of achieving – what in Lacan's understanding is – the impossible: Being an active subject *in* the midst of the spectacle, which one might call this gaze-defined relation to the surrounding world, and not – as is the case with Lacan's example – merely being a passive, blameless subject, defined *by* the spectacle. Both gaze-positions are activated in the grotto. From the inside, the image of oneself falls to pieces in the very moment the mirror image of the body is splintered into thousands of tiny particles that are *seen* by the indefinable gazes, which are cast from the kaleidoscopes' apertures. With your eye pressed up against the kaleidoscope's aperture, on the other hand, you take charge of the omniscient gaze – the world's gaze – that reflects itself in the resplendent interior. But in contradistinction to Lacan's subject, the body of which seems

[1] Jacques Lacan: *Les quatre concepts fondamentaux de la psychanalyse,* Éditions du Seuil 1973, p. 69.

to split asunder when placed under the spell of the diminutive sardine can's gaze, Eliasson *gathers together* his viewer's body by offering a gaze position to which we ordinarily have no access – in any event, not according to Lacan's diagram of vision.

For whereas from inside the grotto, you are being whirled into the mirrors' abyss, from the outside, you are standing in a position to look right through the experience as a construction, created by a laboriously constructed steel skeleton. Through the vehicle of this 'double stop' you become aware of your own position as both seeing and being seen, situated between perspective's source and its terminal point. Eliasson's work appears to have been fitted into an awareness that the subjective position is marked by a spatiality, a gliding, which turns the viewer into subject *and* object at one and the same time, entirely according to the body's placement in relation to the work. 'The antispective situation' places a question mark alongside and criticizes the notion of the polarization between subject and object that has characterized the Western world's way of thinking. What the *situation* introduces instead is the opportunity for an augmented reflexivity that arises in the interaction more than it does in the contemplation. Consequently, existing – being an individual, a reflective and active subject – comes to be formed in an exchange, in an ongoing negotiation with the situational context of which one forms a part.

Interactions, Situations

In a certain respect, it might be asserted that Olafur Eliasson is not creating works of art. He is creating situations. 'The antispective situation', as the reflecting grotto is called, with its polished steel, constitutes a frame for that meeting between viewer and artwork that Eliasson sets up. In Eliasson's production, the interactive element is not merely a hollow metaphor for the physical meeting between viewer and work, but is frequently of such an evident significance that the work first comes into being in the moment that the viewer makes his/her entrance and becomes an active and supplemental fellow player.

In the situations that Eliasson stages, the interplay is not exclusively of a physical character. In Eliasson's work, the awareness we bring along with us in our meeting with the artworks – a whole series of expectations, which have been attuned according to the cultural templates and codes that shape our perception, i.e. our sensory experience of the world – is put into play to a great degree. And it is these cultural templates which, according to Lacan, operate as a mediator between two gaze-positions, seeing and being seen. These templates prescribe our way of presenting ourselves before the world's gaze – as when we, for example, are posing, unconsciously and alone, in front of the mirror. At the same time, they fit into our own gaze as it turns toward the surrounding world, by arranging the world in secure, recognizable categories – as when we, for example, instantly decode our fellow human beings according to what is the present day's prevalent means of standardization. The world's all-encompassing gaze, which Lacan experienced in the fishing boat, is held at bay by the cultural codes' intervention. For Eliasson, the awareness that our perception is culturally coded plays a central role. He declares:

"When I work with an object or installation I think about how the object, through its codes and connections in culture, influences the spectator or person engaging with the object. – But I think equally much about how the person in fact changes the object by the already existing knowledge about and recognizability of the given object or installation or situation. It works both ways: I see [that] the person, when engaging in a project of mine, influences the project as well as [that] the experience of the same project also influences the person – that's why I think that exposing the representational layer sort of clears the experience and makes it possible for us to see ourselves seeing – or knowing that we are seeing and seeing that we know."[2]

Our experiences, then, are constantly oscillating between the expectations we bring with us, the cultural templates that make it possible for us to structure and recognize our reality, and the physical meeting between object and viewer, which creates the situation. The perception is not exclusively a 'purely' physical phenomenon, but something that arises in what is often a complex interaction.

Representation and Presentation

Eliasson's work most often takes its stance in the midst of this cross field between the cultural codes that can

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[2] Olafur Eliasson & Marianne Krogh Jensen: "Excerpt from the diary talk", in: Eckard Schneider (ed.): *The Mediated Motion – Olafur Eliasson*, Kunsthaus Bregenz, Bregenz, & Verlag der Buchhandlung Walter König, Cologne 2001, pp. 31-32.

be called 'the representation' and that which can be called 'the presentation' – that is to say, the utopian idea which holds that things really exist behind the cultural codes which mostly serve to define our relationship to the surrounding world. Eliasson, however, has no faith whatsoever in the presentation as something essential situated transcendent to the representation. On the contrary. When he makes the rain fall inside, when he builds a waterfall that falls upward and when he allows the thick cascades of moss to grow all over the art institutions' white walls, Eliasson is in full gear, going about "exposing the representational layer," as he puts it. And not for purposes of attaining some kind of essence by scraping off the representation's veneer of the presentation, but rather in order to demonstrate to us *how* we perceive, experience and sense *while* we are perceiving, experiencing and sensing. Let's take the example of nature which, according to Eliasson, is not a 'true' and primordial category – that is to say, a 'presentation' – but is, on the contrary, a result of the many representational layers that constitute our image of reality. "We see nature with cultivated eyes," he writes. "Again, there is no truthful nature, there is only your and my construct of such."[3]

Eliasson is working instead on the basis of an awareness that conceptions such as 'truth', 'reality', 'aura' and 'essence' are the result of complex cross-fertilizations in the human perception and consciousness. His stance is phenomenological, and rooted in the fundamental notion that phenomenon and consciousness – object and subject – cannot be conceived separately. And he appears to be attentive to the fact that the ambition to stimulate the viewer to *see him/herself see* and to *sense him/herself sense* calls for a sharpened attention to these very cross-fertilizations. He harbors no romantic notions about removing the representation. On the contrary, he points toward representation as something crucial to our way of sensing. "Without memory there would be no recognition – no value systems – no sense of time – and finally, no expectations," he writes. "Such a thing as a primordial sensation doesn't exist, only culture. "[4]

The representation is always present. It is a necessary condition for being able to sense at all.
And it is with this consciousness that Eliasson so carefully orchestrates and stages his exhibitions and their spatial courses, when he points out and exposes the representation *as* representation. And the urge toward this exposure arises as part and parcel of a realization that experience's authenticity does not involve employing a representation for purposes of making believe or for pulling the wool over our eyes. Nor does it have to do with allowing the presentation to stand all by itself. What the authenticity does depend on, on the other hand, is the degree of *transparency*. With this in mind, what Eliasson does is to render visible the awareness that our perception is a product of a series of filters, acquired by learning: We can take things for granted to such an extent that we do not really even *see* them any more. In other words, merely casting a gaze into the mirror is not sufficiently adequate for purposes of heightening one's self-reflexivity. As is the case in the grotto, the mirror also has to throw the gaze back and offer different gaze-positions for the subject-formation to assume form in a movement that proceeds beyond the mindless mirroring in the culturally coded images that define Lacan's subject.

The Exhibition as Ideology

One of the places which is, to a great extent, fenced in by a cultural codex is the museum. In something of a polemic way, one could assert the museum, *qua* its historic, sociological and political identity, has evolved into being an exceptional sensory machine with an utterly distinct body-codex, around which the museum's visiting public automatically adapts itself. Gestures, postures, language and movement suddenly come to assume a very special form that seems to be guided and controlled by the institution's demands. This enforced orthodoxy, which finds its parallel in the consumer culture's marketing strategies, where the standardizing regimentation of the consumer promises greater profits to the market, constitutes a steadily expanding challenge to Olafur Eliasson and takes on the important role of co-player in his activities transpiring within the walls of the museum institution. "The only thing we have in common is that we are different," resounds one of Eliasson's most distinctive *statements* in his confrontation with subjectivity's enforced regimentation. A confrontation, which in Eliasson's meticulously planned work with the spatial organization of his exhibitions, entails that the viewer is thrown into relief as an individual subjectivity, who does not allow him/herself to be adapted under the institution's ideological wing span, but aspires rather to be shaped as part of a dynamic interplay with his/her surrounding world. When, for example, Eliasson often organizes his exhibitions in such a way that they are introduced with the work entitled *Room for one colour*, which consists of a series of mono-frequency yellow lamps that reduce all the visible colors to a yellowish

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[3] Olafur Eliasson: "Seeing Yourself Sensing", in: *Olafur Eliasson*, Phaidon, London & New York 2002.
[4] Olafur Eliasson & Marianne Krogh Jensen: "Excerpt from the diary talk", in: Eckard Schneider (ed.): *The Mediated Motion – Olafur Eliasson*, Kunsthaus Bregenz, Bregenz, & Verlag der Buchhandlung Walter König, Cologne 2001, p. 7

scale and cause the viewer's sense of sight to become sharper and more distinct, what is being carried forth is a kind of 'cleansing' of the museum's mode of looking at the world, in favor of the viewer's very own, created in the individual's retina and profoundly incorporated into the eye's physiology. And we come to be more attentive to the fact that our sight does not arise by itself, but that it is *mediated* by electromagnetic waves of light energy in the surroundings that render sight possible.

In his exhibitions, what Eliasson is actually pointing out is that the frames are staged and that the experience is defined by a series of representational registers. In an article entitled "Museums are radical" he writes:

"When the *ideology* of a display or exhibition is not acknowledged as a part of the exhibition itself, the socialising potential of that exhibition is sacrificed on behalf of formal values. To avoid this situation, any chosen ideological strategy, any marketing choice, any architectural detail, must not only be considered as a condition and part of the project, but must also somehow be revealed to visitors and thus allow for some transparency in the mediation." [5]

This manner of rendering visible, of course, does not assume form merely by putting up a sign which might, for example, call attention to the fact that each and every architectonic element in the exhibition has been chosen and determined by the artist. More specifically, it involves navigating – via the exhibition's *own* components – one's way through the cross-field between representation and presentation. When Eliasson, in his *La situazione antispettiva,* shows the steel frame that holds the mirrors in place or when he allows the many pipes, pumps and other article of technical necessity to remain fully visible (and fully available for operation) in his artworks with water, this is a matter of elucidating the process of staging and of revealing the representation as a *part* of the art experience. And this sense of awareness not only comes to the forefront in the individual work, but also in the overall architectonic and spatial context within which the works make their appearance.

The realization that subject and object meet one another and are whirled together in the situations for which he creates the frames permeates Eliasson's exhibition work to a considerable degree. As has been intimated, 'the work' does not exist without a subject, but is something that comes into being in a spatially and temporally defined meeting with a spectator and his/her body, his/her movement and his/her expectations. For this reason, 'the work' does not easily lend itself to being reproduced in isolation from its context (even though we do so in the pages of the present catalog). In those instances where Eliasson, in connection with his exhibitions, creates spatial, architectonic elapses, he does so because he is just as concerned with the transitions between the different spaces, with ceiling heights and with architectonic details as he is with the individual work's placement in the overall context – and precisely because the act of sensing is formed as part of a dynamic interchange in time and space.

Minding the world

The exhibition at ARoS Aarhus Kunstmuseum, which has been bestowed with the title *Minding the world*, is actually built around an awareness that the movement from one work to the next – and not only the meeting with the single work – generates meaning. With its vertical orientation points, organized in six separate levels, which constantly offer an invitation to the viewer to make his/her *own* individual choices with respect to how to move around in the museum, ARoS's innovative architecture constitutes the architectonic frame around the exhibition. And rather than dictate one single pathway through the show, Eliasson has analogously arranged a course of movement where the visiting spectator is constantly being encouraged to make a decision about his/her own progression through the exhibition's various rooms. The experiences from the preceding room are carried into the next one. And no two experiences are identical, since the exhibition actually shapes itself *in time;* with water that is moving around and with light that changes color and direction, the exhibition's individual components themselves come to be emblems of changeability, of movement and of time's extension in space.

As has been mentioned, Eliasson's stance is phenomenological. The French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty has exerted a great deal of influence on the artist, who is trying to elicit a heightened sense of self-reflexivity and self-consciousness on the part of the viewer who meets his works. Merleau-Ponty regarded the body and the world as being of the same substance, as being tightly woven together on the basis of the view that the body is a dynamic, interactive and sensual consciousness, which imparts meaning and

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5 Olafur Eliasson: "Museums are radical", in: Susan May (ed.): *The Weather Project*, Tate Modern, London 2003.

form to the surrounding world. According to Merleau-Ponty, one does not dwell at some analytic distance from the world – one simply *is* that interpretation one employs in taking on a given situation. And the world exists by virtue of the perspective one has on the world. Consequently, our awareness about the world is similarly an awareness about the body, since the world and space are perceived by a sensing body in movement. Spatiality is not a static phenomenon, but is rather defined by and arises in the interaction with movement – the interaction with what Merleau-Ponty calls 'situational spatiality', as contrasted with 'positional spatiality', which – in contrast to the former term – defines the subject and the world as placed in two fixed, immovable positions.

The visiting spectator's movement, then, constitutes a fundamental component within and for the space. As Olafur Eliasson writes: "In my work, I have tried to present time or duration, the relational understanding of orientation, and movement as some of the fundamental basics for experiencing/understanding space – and thus ourselves."[6] At *The Blind Pavilion* exhibition at the Venice Biennale 2003, the viewer's pattern of movement was, in the most literal sense, attached to the building as an extensive system of stairways and ramps, constructed with plain wood and without any special purpose or aesthetic justification above and beyond those involving movement, in order to accordingly convey the awareness of the body's experience and meaning-producing potentials back to the viewer. The recognition that the experience of a work of art is profoundly integrated within – and let into – the body of the viewer who beholds a work of art and his/her pattern of movement is elucidated in Eliasson's project in order to hone the awareness of movement's significance. The space is never 'innocent', but is always mediated by the memory, by the surroundings, by the expectations – and by the movement. When Eliasson's light works change character in synch with time and when the viewers move through the works in a way that runs transverse to the works' 'own' time, what is being brought into focus is the sensation of time and space. And several layers are being put into play in our experience of ourselves within a spatial context – like when two trains pass each other and there is some measure of doubt about whether we are actually standing still or in motion. The world becomes distended. Its subtlety is rendered specific and concrete and now becomes a physical experience that we can carry along with us into other situational contexts. The attention is directed toward those points in our consciousness which have gone unnoticed up to now.

The act of retelling an exhibition in written form might be at variance with Olafur Eliasson's basic artistic idea that experience, realization and perception emerge and arise in the physical meeting between subject and object inside a space. Nonetheless, I will hazard the risk. In what follows, I will set forth certain comments about the works that meet the viewer on his/her way around in the exhibition's thoroughly arranged scenography. It goes without saying that the experience of the work can never find its proper counterpart in a textual exposition. Through the vehicle of the written word, however, the meanings that arise and emerge in the meeting with the viewer can lay the cornerstone for a frame of understanding around Eliasson's project.

Nature-Culture: A Round Trip

The experience that Lacan had in the fishing boat was of a physical, bodily nature: The world's omniscient gaze, which suddenly turned up in the sardine can's reflection, gave rise to a sensation of bodily schism. The human subject and its awareness about his/her own body – and accordingly of his/her being in the world – is actually formed in a reflection, in a meeting that allows the person's gaze to become the reality-generating instance. The mirror appears in several of Olafur Eliasson's works, both in the form of physically tangible mirrors, designed in such a way that compels the viewer to cast a new perspective around him/herself and his/her surroundings, and in the form of lights, glass and water, which both concretely and metaphorically return our gazes and our expectations, throwing them back at us.

Water, lights and mirrors are recurrent materials in the exhibition *Minding the world*. The exhibition is ushered in with the work entitled *Waterfall*, which meets the spectator in the exhibition's foyer and consists of a steel scaffold, from which running water fashions a waterfall. In the manner of a constructed rocky crag formation, the waterfall seems to spring forth from the foyer's end wall, at one and the same time a piece of culture and a piece of nature. The waterfall is indeed one of our culture's 'picture postcards'; it is the veritable image of the sublime powers of nature. The conception of untamed nature's vehement fury finds its most extreme visual expression in the gushing stream's movement, by which the

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[6] Excerpted from an e-mail sent to Doreen Massey. Reproduced in: *Olafur Eliasson – Colour memory and other informal shadows*, Astrup Fearnley Museet for Moderne Kunst, Oslo 2004.

wandering hiker can let him/herself be engulfed in a sublime moment. However, precisely because the waterfall has come to be transformed into a symbol, a representative phantom that guarantees the experience of nature's authenticity, it has come to forfeit its significance. Nature has been reduced to an image in that representational register we call our reality. But, as Olafur Eliasson maintains, nature is not exclusively a symbolic representation. Nature can also be a place where the human being has the possibility of making a careful examination of him/herself in his or her surrounding environment. Here, the human being gains a sense of his/her own existence in and perception of the world:

"Nature as such has no 'real' essence – no truthful secrets to be revealed. I have not come closer to anything essential other than myself and, besides, isn't nature a cultural state anyway? What I have come to know better is my own relation to so-called nature (i.e., my capacity to orient myself in this particular space), my ability to see and sense and move through the landscapes around me."[7]

In Olafur Eliasson's work, reality's 'natural' processes and our ostensibly objective intercourse with the world as a cultural construct, which is shaped by time, place, memory and custom, are laid bare. To a great extent, we are *partners* in the work. All of the memories that the waterfall arouses in us – all the way from the paintings of I.C. Dahl to advertisements picturing remote tourism destinations – impart to the work its *representational* appearance, while our entirely specific perception of the work as a steel construction, forged from human technology, activates its *real* identity. Both of these layers are experienced in the meeting with the work: simultaneously and so wonderfully unpretentiously. The representational and the real cross swords. That which ought to be an overwhelming experience of nature is only a machine. And our perception constantly swings back and forth between these two experiential forms.

Through the Eye

After the encounter with the waterfall in the museum's foyer, the visitor is led into the *Yellow corridor*. Here, the viewer's body literally becomes the projection surface for the light that is being projected. The monofrequency lamps bathe the corridor and the bodies that are moving through it in a yellow light. The light exerts an influence on the viewer's retina in such a way that all visible colors are reduced to a monochrome scale of yellow. On account of the missing quantity of 'light information', which the brain is otherwise assigned to process, the viewer's vision appears to be sharper. Minuscule impurities and wrinkles in the other visitors' faces suddenly show up before others' glances, which seem to be tuned up for seeing that which one ordinarily does not see. At the same time, the eye manages to compensate for the missing color spectrum which we know from white light by producing a surplus of the remaining primary colors, red and blue – which, of course, add together to make purple. When the viewer subsequently moves his/her way into the next room, the gaze is 'dyed' by a purple tone, created within the eye's physiology. 'The work', then, exists inside the human eye, not in a reality situated *out there*.

If you choose to make a little side-trip and digress from the corridor, you move your way into a darkened room with a *Camera obscura*. The camera obscura was originally a kind of forerunner for the modern camera; it consisted of a closed box that was impervious to light, into the volume of which light rays were conveyed as an 'image'. In Eliasson's work, a lens penetrates through the wall and facilitates in infusing the room, which the viewer has yet to enter, as an image on a surface. We can consider the *camera obscura* to be a model of the human eye, since this is a device that structures its surrounding world in *images*. But at the same time, the model appears to be delineating what is namely an ideal condition, a sensory machine, because in our ordinary intercourse with the world, our gaze certainly does not perceive the world in photographic images, but rather in a constantly zooming, moving and bodily interaction. In front of the *camera obscura,* on the other hand, you see your own ideal gaze displayed as a projection, created by a lens. You have not come any closer to the truth *out there* on the other side of the lens, but you have become aware that there are several different truths that co-exist, all according to whether the gaze is static, as is the case inside the *camera obscura's* sensory machine, or dynamic, as is the case in the bodily interaction with the space behind the lens.

The space that is projected by the lens constitutes the large and extensive work, *Frost activity*, which in all its simplicity consists of a tiled floor and a mirrored ceiling. The tiles are made of Icelandic stones – two types of basaltic rock and liberith – which are based on the form that columnar basalt possesses. This is a formation of lava rock that emerged in nature as a crystalline form when the molten lava collided with ice. The form, which with its regular nature appears to be mathematically defined and almost manmade,

[7] Olafur Eliasson: "Seeing Yourself Sensing", in: *Olafur Eliasson*, Phaidon, London & New York 2002.

has accordingly been brought forth by nature's very own logic. The tiles have been laid down in a pattern of these three different kinds of stone. The pattern appears to be transforming constantly into convex and concave forms, even though the tiles are flat and have been laid down in one single plane. In much the manner of a ballroom, the space unfolds itself in its height and its width. The tiles seem to spread themselves out in what is in principle an interminable ornament, while the room is doubled in height through the mirrors' placement in the ceiling. The actual room cannot be 'read' forthwith by the viewer, who comes to entertain some measure of doubt about his/her own relationship to the space that he or she now occupies. The tiles invite a certain form of rhythmic logic in the stepwise movement across the floor, while the back of the head inevitably bends backwards in the gaze's confrontation with the infinite mirroring, which pulls the movement upward and not forward, which would otherwise appear to be the objective of the tiles. As an individual in space, you are pulled in different directions: In the ceiling, you see yourself as a tiny element within a greater whole and not, as when standing before the wardrobe mirror, as a whole and stable subject, closed around yourself. In the floor's ornament, on the other hand, the pattern of movement has been instrumentalized and set into what is an almost militarist system, which stands in sharp contrast to the impression of the hovering, detached bodies suspended in the ceiling's mirrors. And you may negotiate with the space, taking possession of it once more in the simultaneous activation of your gaze in the mirror and your body as it moves across the floor – and you can feel a sharpened sense of attention to your own bodily being in a spatial contextual situation.

The sense of wonder that invariably emerges in the wake of those situations for which Eliasson creates the frames is most often brought about by an increasingly heightened awareness about one's own navigation in a spatial and temporal continuity. You are compelled to enter into a dialogue with the surrounding world and you can no longer take your being-in-the-world for granted, because you are now taking action *in* the spectacle and not being defined *by* the spectacle.

Between Expectation and Body

In the three more intimate rooms that Eliasson has built up as a counterweight to *Frost activity's* extension in length and height, there are four works. You can make your entrance into the three rooms in one of two different ways: Either passing through the work *Beauty* – a rainbow – which has been positioned to the left of the rooms, or by moving around on the right side, where the bristling steel grotto *Multiple grotto* discloses itself as an appendix, as a kind of 'terrace' which has been mounted to the outside structure of the rooms.

What these four pieces, notwithstanding their varying manner of activating different sensory registers in the viewer, have in common is that they all stimulate a sharpened awareness about human beings' orientation capacity.

The first of the rooms has been covered with Eliasson's *Soil quasi bricks*, which are threedimensional tiles, in a manner of speaking. The tiles are made of compacted soil. They have been kiln-fired twice for purposes of getting the almost black color to stand out. All of the tiles are made by hand, with small variations in the dark color as a consequence. The tile is a variation of a type of brick that Eliasson has developed in collaboration with the architect Einar Thorsteinn, who is also the co-creator of the floor-tiles in *Frost activity*. The brick type is based on a complex mathematical system, and the geometric principle that defines the form is also found in nature – for example, in columnar basalt and beehives. At the same time, these bricks have been developed on the basis of a so-called 'all-space filling system', which makes it possible to build solid structures without any hollow spaces. Inside the room, all of the walls are covered with the tiles, with an atmosphere of intimacy as a consequence.

The organic soil has been pressed together in finicky forms, as a concrete visualization of a swatch of cultivated nature. Associations to both the prehistoric cave's intimate space and a meticulously structured architectonic construction come to the forefront and deposit themselves in the experience of the room. The tiles are neither 'pure' nature nor 'pure' culture, but situate themselves rather at some indeterminate place in between these two poles, which ordinarily define our understanding of the surrounding environment. And the sensing of the tiles is indeed very physical and bodily, since the tiled wall seems to move in convex and concave forms, all according to the viewer's pattern of movement.

In the next room, which is connected with the first via a short passage, penetrated by the colored glass kaleidoscope, *Red green kaleidoscope*, the piece entitled *Triple ripple* is located. The room is circular. On this account, it reflects the exhibition space's large fire escapes, which from either end of the exhibition hall 'close off' the room with a round curvature. Three round glass discs with a circular, targetformed

pattern are revolving slowly around in the room. Struck by an intense beam of light, the glass discs generate in turn a moiré-looking pattern – this is a pattern that awakens associations with veins in a tree and is generally found in woven material; this pattern envelops the entire room and the spectator who enters. The objects themselves – the delicately made glass discs – are merely instruments for the room's constantly shifting movement, created by the pattern's sustained grazing over the walls and the transformation of the room as well as of the visiting viewers who enter.

In the third room, a stroboscopic light appears to be holding the raindrops in suspension in an *Untitled* piece. A column of water falling from a visible hose and then gathered in a transparent basin is the room's sole object. The delicate column seems to be an almost physical 'thing' inside this large room, although its form changes character in synch with the blinking of the stroboscopic light. There is no attempt here to conceal any of the technical and utterly simple necessities; they all make their appearance in consonance with the experience of the work.

In the meeting with the work, a series of expectations is activated in the mind of the viewer.
We are all very familiar with the raindrops in our experience of the changing weather. The rain is a slice of uncontrollable nature, which has a way of breaking its way through even the most urbanized reality and descends on both subject and world in one long stream of downpour. In our meeting with Eliasson's raindrops, however, nature puts in an appearance in a kind of hypnotic choreography, a controlled and carefully conducted rain dance, where time is stopped in pointillist images of luminous drops. Our expectations about the nature of raindrops as something that we would prefer to steer clear of, in our rapid movements through the rain showers, are suspended here to make way for a chance to linger awhile with the raindrops as both spatial and temporal cursors.

What is common to the works that appear in the three rooms is a spontaneous collapse of meaning between the expectations and experiences we carry along with us and the factual situations that arise in the rooms – hence the sense of disorientation, which is namely what arises in any collapse between the expectation and the physical movement. In the first room – *Soil quasi bricks* – what transpires is a constant gliding between nature and culture, since the concentrated space, the almost imperceptible scent of fired earth and the tiles' porous surface which gives off earthy dust all inevitably arouse associations with something almost primeval. The forms of the tiles and the room's regular geometry, on the other hand, draw the experience in an entirely different direction. As a viewer, one is necessarily compelled to navigate in this cross-field of expectations and physical experience; there is a sharpening of the attention to oneself as the meaning-generating instance. In the meeting with the next room, where *Triple ripple* is located, one is absorbed with lightning speed as a part of the projection surface, by means of which the illusory notion that we as people have control of space is completely suspended. We *are* a part of space and space is not something static and solid; it arises in a constant negotiation between space, object and viewer. In the third room, on the other hand, the space indeed appears to be emerging as part of an intimate interplay between our expectations and the nature of the raindrops. Much like the other two works, however, the *Untitled* work changes character in synch with the time.We step into the rooms with a rhythm that collides with their own internal times. No two viewers will see precisely the same static pictures. They will step away from the rooms again with an experience corroborating that meaning arises in time, in space, in the things and in ourselves – all at one and the same time.

Expectation and physical world jostle in a most striking way in the work entitled *Beauty*. A lamp illuminates fine and steadily spraying drops of water. Entirely according to the viewer's position, a rainbow emerges between the light and the atomized water. The title, in itself, is both culturally defined and culturally loaded, while the rainbow is encircled by an even greater mythological and emblematic aura than the waterfall. But at the same time as the representational layer is so intensely present, the work comes into being in a physical, bodily and visual interaction with the viewer. The fine drops stick to the skin and the hair and endow the experience of the room with a concentrated physical presence. The work's emergence has been inscribed into – and is entirely dependent upon – the body's movement inside the room. The color, on the other hand, arises inside the eye, which is busy orienting itself inside this room that is so charged with meaning. For Eliasson, beauty is a question of interaction, not a hollow reflection of or a fulfillment of certain culturally valorizing expectations.

With his works, Olafur Eliasson places a question mark alongside of the way in which we, in our relations with the world, seem to naturalize our own visual and bodily experiences to the point where the world suddenly begins to resemble its own representation. A rainbow is not just a rainbow. Neither is it a representational emblem nor a purely 'natural' phenomenon, which exists independently of people. We have given a name to that play of color that arises between light, water and gaze and turned it into something that

belongs to us. But the sensing of the rainbow depends entirely on the individual beholder. As Olafur Eliasson himself says: “The only thing we have in common is that we are different.”

In Dialogue with the Space

Behind the three rooms, the grotto reveals itself. You can see it from the outside and take possession of the gaze and the image – or you can step inside and become a part of the picture yourself, the ‘spectacle’ that arises in the others’ gazes. If you throw your gaze far enough down into the exhibition space, you will see a trapezoid-shaped opening – *Glass house* – which reveals a corner of yet another room filled with colored lights, which change, almost imperceptibly, in a rotating movement. *We only meet when we move* is a large, triangular room, in the center of which an intensely bright lamp illuminates a number of colored glass plates. These glass pieces have been made from a special type of glass, which changes color entirely as a function of the movement – the viewer’s movement as well as the glass’s own movement – while the motors make the colored glass surfaces turn around, slowly. The colors dye and scan the triangular room. Like a lighthouse, which in one continuous, rotating movement occupies and captivates its surroundings with its luminosity, the floating color fields fashion a constantly shifting, rotating and relative movement pattern. In the mind of the viewer, some doubt arises about whether it is the room, the glass or the color that is moving. ‘The work’ comes into being in this fleeting, changeable totality, where the viewer constitutes that element which, *qua* the eye’s sensitivity to light, consummates and completes the work. By virtue of the temporal elapse that arises in the movement of the rotating glass, you find as a viewer that you are compelled to enter into a dialogue with the space. No longer do you take the space for granted; you appropriate it, you occupy it and you hone your own sense of attentiveness concerning yourself in this light- and color-filled room.

As the body carries us around through the many different rooms of the exhibition, the world appears to be far more complex – as an entity that is looking back at us, just like in the grotto’s reflecting, fluid interior. In contrast to the Renaissance artist, who regarded the world exclusively from perspective’s source, we also see the world looking back at us as we move our way around in the exhibition and encounter the world in glimpses. It is not only perspective’s source that constitutes our gaze-position. In fact, we also see ourselves seeing. We have become acting subjects *in* the spectacle and it is here, in the interaction with the surrounding world, that our subjectivity is created. And it is right here that it will develop. We are being made conversant with new spaces and new points of orientation that have hitherto been taken for granted. And perhaps the meeting with Olafur Eliasson’s work can entail that the consciousness will also direct its ‘sight’ toward new points of orientation and forms of cognition – and that the possibility for a heightened self-awareness will suddenly appear to be open.

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