

Light Conditions

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To me, a potential of art lies in its ability to let us express ourselves by combining aesthetic reflections with what we could broadly call 'ethics', understood as a basic feeling of responsibility towards other people and the world in which we live. This is actually not unique to art; when architecture or design objects, for instance, are successful, they perform in the same manner by melding aesthetic challenges with ethical questions.

Today, eco-awareness is a field within ethics that we cannot ignore, because of the many ominous reports on global warming; but political, scientific, and technological considerations also join in. We have reached a point where these areas are no longer recognisable as discrete realms or opposites in a spectrum. Instead, we should be on the lookout for a composite realm that lets all these different ideas and languages intertwine and reverberate. But 'to look for' is not the right term; we have to *work* actively with our senses and words in order to sharpen our sensibility towards this complex, heterogeneous field.

I would like to focus on aesthetics in relation to the part of ethics that is found in the idea of environmental sustainability and responsibility. Obviously, my focus is not entirely new: we have seen environmental awareness surge before, not least in the 1970s, when terms like *energy crisis* were first introduced. But today, we are facing a situation in which global perspectives have advanced into our everyday lives with new force: we cannot afford *not* to think about the environmental consequences of our individual actions, about the relationship between the individual and the collective. And we have reached a stage where such deliberations can be integrated with our aesthetic feelings.

I suggest that we look at this relationship by focusing on light. A small example will do to begin with: when I was young, I often felt alone when I was in total or almost total darkness. In my slight discomfort I would become uncertain about whether I was, in fact, completely present. I would turn on the light to increase my feeling of presence, and subconsciously use it to emphasise the fact that I was *here*, illuminated in my room.

The other day, I turned on the light when I entered my study, and leaving the room after a while, I turned it off again. I was then struck by a subtle difference from my usual behaviour: my decision to turn off the light was driven by a communal feeling. And instead of being alone in the darkness, we could almost say that I was there *with others*. The feeling was short and unspectacular and the length of time I have taken here in attempting to describe it seems disproportionate to the importance of the matter. But the point is that I noted an interest in collective matters as I turned off the light in order to save power. The private room of my study gave space to a public concern.

By merging ideas of light as an aesthetic matter *and* as a matter of energy, we can bring to the fore the possibility of being singular – when we need light for ourselves – and yet plural in the way we rationalise our needs: that is, minding collective issues within our individual lives. I find that light has a strong performative potential because it opens up a new conception of what it means to be an individual, depending on our relations with others, and it helps us understand the plurality in which we take part. To borrow a term from the philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy, it is a situation that we could define as

'being-with'. To put it a little grandly: being singular plural is what constitutes reality. By focusing on light, we can thus open up a different way of seeing and being in the world.

In my current investigation I am trying to emphasise the pragmatic nature of light and to 'make it explicit', as the sociologist Bruno Latour writes in a small text on air, appropriating an idea from the philosopher Peter Sloterdijk. I am not inquiring into particular light waves or particles; nor am I concerned with a reading of light as a religious symbol or as a symbol of life. Talking about light *per se* often leads to a partial definition only, which entails a certain numbness towards its experiential qualities – the exact opposite of my pursuit. If we are to think about the ephemeral character of light, we should engage in a much more tangible investigation.

Let me give an example of the difficulty: the purpose of streetlights is to create visibility and safety in public spaces. Through constant illumination streetlights promise protection at night. Light has thus been rationalised and made reliable. Unfortunately, the even output of public lighting, however convenient and necessary, simultaneously dulls our sensitivity. We become numb to the sensation of light, to its polyphonic nature. And blinking commercial advertisements point towards the message of the signs – the sale of goods – not to the light itself. Hence, focus is on the street and the people in it, or the statements that are made, not on the light itself. This points to the fact that the immaterial character of light is difficult to grasp because we tend to focus on what is being lit – from the crops that grow under the sun and our skin that is burned or tanned by it, to the pages in the book that we read at night time under the glow of a lamp.

The fact that light is always there for things other than itself points to a strange materialisation of its immaterial character. This materialisation, by which I mean the act of ascribing a stable meaning or even a truth-like quality to light, can be seen in diverse mythological and religious interpretations that connect light to a god or an imaginary creation, or, in the twentieth century, in the objectification that we have witnessed in modernist and scientific discourses. The ephemeral character of light, on the other hand, tends to be open to personal narratives and interpretations. This openness inscribes the subject as a central agent in what we could call the light-space equation. The meaning that we give to light depends on the time, the context, and our personal perspective; hence, the subject becomes central – you and I.

One way in which to perceive changes in the daylight is to be in a landscape, where you are called upon to negotiate your relationship to the changing light conditions. After having been away from artificial light for some time, you will begin to adjust yourself according to the natural light and darkness; a full view of the sky makes a difference to your perception of a rainbow, a blue sky or the varying positions of the clouds. Because these phenomena constantly change, it is possible to register more acutely the relativity of light and the changes of atmosphere that it brings about.

By studying natural daylight, we may be able to reconsider – and perhaps even redesign – our urban light concepts. This increased sensibility

towards light I find incredibly valuable. I think we can acquire it by training our abilities to assess the subtle shifts of light intensity and hues.

It is by now clear that light is a complex issue because of its elusive qualities and relativity. As a necessary ingredient in an unbelievably varied range of situations, it opens up indeterminate spaces and challenges us to redefine our sensibility towards our surroundings.

The topic can be elucidated further by taking a close look at the lamp as object: we buy a lamp with a specific context in mind – our living room, perhaps – wanting it to match the other pieces of furniture, our taste and needs. But the number of Watts it uses has also become an issue: is energy wasted or saved? Its mode and place of production may equally influence our choice: who produced it under what conditions and how far away from us? Then we can look at the curious fact that the lamp is its own light and makes itself seen; it is itself the reason why one can see it, contrary, for instance, to a sculpture, which needs exterior light in order to be seen. The potential of the lamp is in this sense to be both light source and sculpture – it is a sculpture that materialises light.

In many of my artworks I try to address the issue of light by giving it a body, a tangible dimension. An example is *The light setup*, installed at Malmö Konsthall in 2005. I divided the exhibition space into different zones of daylight and artificial white light, which made it possible to experience shifts in the light intensity. Since the space was empty apart from the light and the visitors moving about, the changing light conditions became central. The artificial and natural light did not take on the dimensions of an object – the object became the space and its temporary inhabitants. What took place was a sort of deconstruction of the stable light situation and the production of a differentiated light-body-space. The 'illuminated' visitors, moving about on their own or in groups, became the real material of the exhibition. We could say that the work was unravelled in a series of encounters between the institution as a 'white cube', the different light sources, the visitors, and the space. It thus *performed* in collaboration with the visitors through the subtle variations and displacements of light and perception. Precisely this situation is an example of how people, finding themselves in the same room, may nevertheless see and experience the situation differently. We could say that light conditions have social implications, since they make explicit the collective situation in which we take part. Thus, the atmosphere becomes a sort of socio-cultural framework.

By thinking about what light is and how it defines the atmosphere of a situation, by scrutinising objects that emit light, we are able to consider its ephemeral qualities. These have a crucial impact on our understanding of our immediate surroundings, the geopolitical context, eco-sustainability, the consequences of our actions, the social relations in which we participate, as well as ourselves. And if we enhance our sensibility towards the perception of light, letting aesthetic and eco-ethical concerns intertwine, I think we will begin to conceive differently of space and our ability to orient ourselves altogether.