Crary, Jonathan. “Your Colour Memory: Illuminations of the Unforeseen.”
In *Olafur Eliasson: Minding the world*. Edited by Olafur Eliasson and Gitte Ørskou.
Exhibition catalogue. Aarhus: ARoS Aarhus Kunstmuseum, 2004: 209-225.

Your colour memory: Illuminations of the Unforeseen

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First of all we are in an oval (or a nearly closed loop of wall in an oval-like configuration). But why not begin with the more striking data of sumptuously modulating color that overwhelms any sense of architectural space? Because color for Olafur Eliasson is never an autonomous phenomena or any aesthetic end in itself. Like so many of the ambient flows and evasive materials with which he works, color is a vehicle to explore a range of human and social phenomena. The curved surface of the oval enclosure is one simple but important condition of this particular project: It's purpose is to do away with most of the orienting or stabilizing functions that would be an inevitable part of any rectilinear configuration. By abandoning any flat or planar surfaces he makes it impossible for a spectator to objectify the chromatic events as a property of a delimited surface or screen to which we have a contemplative relation. A room with the right-angles of corners would have provided those stabilizing markers that are so deeply part of our perceptual habits and expectations. Instead the curved interior wall becomes a wide band of illumination with uncertain limits and distances. As we turn to follow the shifting stimuli we can never suspend our awareness of our bodies' physical and contingent presence in this enclosure.

Your colour memory is one of several pieces in which Eliasson has positioned luminous displays in various rounded or curvilinear interiors. In a very general sense, he is working with a ‘panoramic’ situation, but he has radically modified some of the elements of the archetypal nineteenth-century panorama. In that older model the spectator could at least pretend to occupy a central position around which a represented 360 degree world could be perceived in its completeness and permanence. This was the apparently sovereign position occupied by the human figure in Caspar David Friedrich's well-known painting Traveller Above the Sea of Clouds (1818). But in fact, the 360 degree image could only be apprehended by the eyes in partial, fragmentary views (usually around 120 or 130 (degrees) that had to be cognitively reassembled into an imagined, but never seen whole. The extravagant, mimetic ambitions of the panorama coincided with broader understandings of the inherent limitations of human vision. The nineteenth century was a crucial historical threshold in which the emergence of modern perceptual technologies began the transfer of human sensory capacities to machines, a development which continues unabated today.

Eliasson, however, uses a quasi-panoramic format in part to reaffirm and reclaim the corporal features of human vision. Rather than construct an external field of visual objects to be consumed by an individual viewer, his panoramic format breaks down some basic, epistemological assumptions about the positions and identities of what is commonly thought to be a subject and object. Through his astonishing deployment of changing hues, he strikingly reveals the precariousness of our notions about what belongs to the world and what belongs to us as perceivers. He is self-consciously working with luminous duration and intensity so as to bring into play the subjective features of human vision associated with after-images. Most of us, most of the time are completely unaware of how the specific physiology of the human optical system is intertwined with what we assume to be a direct and ‘objective’ view of external reality. Our body, in many different ways, is always part of our visual experience, yet we habitually delete those corporal features from conscious awareness. Particularly relevant in the context of this installation is how time and tiredness affect our perception of color, the fact that looking at any color for an

extended period of time produces significant modulations in its appearance (due to fatigue of the related retinal cones sensitive to particular colors). Also important are the ways in which retinal after-images inevitably become part of our visual field, preserving and inscribing the effects of an earlier perception onto new objects, a form of what Eliasson calls ‘colour memory’.

But it was these and many other related features of our experience of color that nourished the enduring suspicion and antipathy to color in dominant traditions of Western European thought.

For several centuries, science and mainstream philosophy regarded color as irrelevant or at best marginal to our understanding and experience of the world because of its instability, its evanescence and its mobile identity. For thinkers like Descartes and Locke, color, because it was bound up with the unreliability of the human senses, could tell us little or nothing about what they believed to be the most important ‘permanent’ truths about reality.

Beginning in the nineteenth century, however, that generalized suspicion of color became obsolete, and philosophical concern with the unreliability of the human senses was expendable as the eye was supplanted by increasingly sophisticated perceptual technologies that had access to events, forces, wavelengths far beyond the limits of our sensory capacities. The scientific status of color also changed decisively over the 1800s as the independent identity of light was subsumed in a physics of magnetism, energy and electricity. Less noted is the momentous industrialization of color that begins in the midnineteenth century, the consequences of which have shaped the visual environment we all inhabit. For the entire history of human culture up to the 1800s, color was inseparable from a direct embeddedness in the natural world. Plants, rainbows, minerals, fires, skies, feathers of birds were some of the countless elements of chromatic experience. The most brilliant dyes for fabrics, for example, had their sources in shellfish, insects, roots and shrubs. But with the technological revolution of the nineteenth century, initially in the field of chemistry, a modernized universe of synthetic and artificial color invaded all areas of life. Color, in vast areas of application, became standardized, fully quantifiable and controllable. No longer tied to the perishable and variable properties of natural phenomena, no longer requiring the accumulation of lived experience for its discrimination, color, even in its most dynamic displays, has become something inert and objective. The propagation of color as information in contemporary digital technologies is merely one more stage in this historical transformation.

Eliasson, though, has no stake in any nostalgic veneration of natural color. All his work begins with the neutral assumption of a biosphere that is irreducibly consolidated with technological objects and processes. As many critics have noted, the materials, procedures and apparatuses with which Eliasson realizes his projects entail an interpenetration of machinic and natural elements in which neither are privileged. A primary goal is that whatever resources he chooses to deploy will produce events and effects that affirm their singularity and irrecuperability that resist commodification and objectification. Certainly the conditions presented in Your colour memory give any spectator a flow of non-repeatable sensations, and one of the implications of Eliasson's approach is an insistence on vision as a continuous and open-ended process, rather than as a discrete or punctual (point to point) act of looking, like at a painting. The chromatic events that occur within the installation, which differ for every viewer, are always poised at an indeterminate limit between the activity of one's nervous system and the shifting, artificial illumination.

Your colour memory and related earlier work are based on a kind of ‘radical empiricism’, like that of the American philosopher William James. Like James, Eliasson is deeply committed to expanding the range of phenomena that could be included in any description

of experience. The current work produces conditions in which we recognize and identify previously unknown or unnoted aspects of our perception: that, for example, some of the most important "facts" we perceive are the facts of continuous change and transition, or the fact of the mobile fringes of the field of vision rather than its center. The boundaryless continuity between the stimulated state of our retinas and the illumination within the architectural setup of the installation pushes us to apprehend the oscillation and flux between them rather than recognizing the independence of either luminous source. This is to hint at only a small fraction of the many previously unknown or unforeseen facets of our experience that are discovered in the work. Not only for James but for philosophers such as Nietzsche, John Dewey, and Henri Bergson, the richer and more variegated the field of our possible experience, the easier it can be to escape the numbing claims of habit and routine. For Eliasson as well, the disruption of habit is one of the conditions of individual and collective freedom.

Although it may be stating the obvious, it is important to emphasize that Eliasson has no interest in some demonstration piece that informs us about the fascinating peculiarities of color vision. If after-images preoccupy him, it is in part as a strategy of challenging and displacing perceptual habits imposed by dominant features of contemporary technological culture. Quite simply, to vividly experience one's own after-images is, at least temporarily, to cease to be a mere consumer of radiant images or energy from screens, monitors, pages, and other sources that clutter our lives. It is to recognize one's self as a generator of luminous phenomena. This is the function of Eliasson's darkened side room: It allows one the seemingly unusual opportunity to ‘see’ light and color in the absence of any external light, to become aware of one's own body generating chromatic events and transformations. This counter-intuitive proposition – light where there is no light – is compelling less for its scientific content than for its cultural and emotional resonances. When the German poet and philosopher Goethe conducted research on after-images in the early nineteenth century, he made clear how such luminous experiences could not only be understood in scientific and physiological terms but also within philosophical traditions going back to the Roman philosopher Plotinus which conceived of existence in term of inner and outer radiance. In Goethe's era the widespread attention to after-images coincided with the spread of romantic theories of mind and knowledge. The empirical fact of ‘internal’ illumination seemed a confirmation that subjective experience was not simply a passive reflection or reception of sensations or data about the world, but rather that the individual, like an autonomous light source, imposed or projected itself on the world, in a sense giving the world its own colors. In relation to two familiar metaphors for the human mind, after-images affirmed the ‘lamp’ over the ‘mirror’ model.

One of the greatest of all European artists, J.M.W. Turner, gave concrete expression to some of the thinking about after-images which Goethe complied in his *Theory of Colours* (1810). Turner, especially in the second half of his career, was convinced that any truth in visual representation required attention to observation of external phenomena and to the physiological determination of light and color. Like others of his generation, Turner experimented with solar after-images; that is, he stared directly at the sun, thus producing the most intense stimulation of the retina possible. The longer one stared, the more vivid were the luminous effects when one finally closed one's eyes. Unlike others less fortunate, Turner was lucky not to suffer permanent damage to his eyesight, and in fact no sane or responsible person today would want to attain the incandescent quality of the chromatic effulgence provoked in the body by sustained contemplation of the unshielded sun. For Turner such experiences led him to represent reality as a dialogue between external sensation and the generative capacities of his own eyes, as a shifting membrane of luminosity for which inner and outer had no secure meanings. Although well beyond the limits of this essay, there are other important affinities between Turner's art and the work of Eliasson, as some critics have noted. My own sense of this common ground, which could include several other artists as well, involves a related sense of how perceptual temporalities (whether social or individual) occur in environments that are always hybrid

assemblages, composed out of collisions or collaborations of human effort (including machines) and natural processes. Clearly, one crucial distinction is that there is no apocalyptic (in the original sense of revelation) component to Eliasson's work, whereas for Turner destructive and sublime events like storms or fires were a clearing or cleansing, a removing of the veil, an opening onto overwhelming or radically new visual experiences. Despite the temptation to apply the word 'sublime' to some of Eliasson's work (for example, the Tate *Weather Project* installation), most of his significant ambitions point in quite different directions. Sublimity, in recent critical usage, has come to characterize a range of experiences and affects in which there is both a loss of individual agency and a breakdown of one's ability to control language or representation. But the extraordinary indetermination and evanescence in much of Eliasson's work is not in the service of some pre-Oedipal dis-organization or a challenge to the ideal of an autonomous subjectivity. Rather if the indeterminate and the ineffable are key qualities of his art, they are present as the inevitable conditions out of which other (distinctly non-sublime) events might tentatively occur, out of which communication, interpersonal exchange, and provisional forms of understanding might be possible. Eliasson's destabilization of certainties has little in common with a celebration of inexpressibility.

Some might want to suggest that much of our experience with *Your colour memory* could be characterized as 'spectral'. This would not be the Newtonian sense of colours that are produced by prismatic dispersal, but 'spectral' meaning unreal, mere appearance, insubstantial like a spectre or phantom. Ever since the mid-nineteenth century and the writings of William Blake, Karl Marx, Max Stirner and others 'spectral' has become a powerful way of describing what is thought to be the fraudulent and delusional quality of life in capitalist society. Even in the recent political analyses of Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt we find the assertion that we are all now living under "the spectral reign of global capitalism". Such accounts carry with them the assumption that another 'unmasked' order of experience might be possible within a transformed social world, a world in which there would presumably be a more directly experienced 'reality', where things would in fact be what they appeared to be. Whatever Eliasson's evaluation of global capitalism might be, his work suggests that 'spectral' effects are a more enduring feature of human experience, rather than something that could be overcome or eradicated. His foregrounding of the after-image intimates that 'spectrality' is what we all live with, that it is a constant condition of our functioning in the world. *Your colour memory* makes us aware that we are imposing insubstantial components of ourselves onto the world we act in. It is a work that recalls something of the cognitive conditions in Andrei Tarkovsky's 1972 film *Solaris*. In this science fiction parable, human beings in an artificially constructed environment found that their memories and other contents of consciousness became fully externalized as ghostly but physically real entities fluctuating between subjective and objective reality. For Tarkovsky, such spectral experiences are unsettling indications of the sensory derangement and impoverishment of contemporary life but are at the same time hopeful portents of the creative power of human memory and its myriad affects and emotions.

Of course Eliasson's work seems removed from the harrowing solemnity of Tarkovsky's films, but it would be a mistake to underestimate the seriousness of his preoccupations. The lightness of his work is not achieved without its own investment of gravity. Eliasson's preoccupation with memory is extraordinarily evocative in that he multiplies and interweaves the registers on which time is experienced. Our 'colour memory' is obviously evident in the physical production of the after-image as an enduring trace of a slightly earlier moment and it is a striking manifestation of how past and present can vividly interpenetrate. But that is hardly the extent of Eliasson's interest in memory, for the piece, in its pulsing overlaps of color build-up and delayed complementaries, activates, even imperceptibly, a deeply affecting field of sedimented longer term memories and lived associations with color. His work attempts to develop the 'persistence of vision' in ways that are fully outside any mechanistic appropriation of the eye. In some ways he is making a return to Goethe's unfinished project which insisted on the ethical dimension of any color

science, for in the nineteenth century the study of after-images he inaugurated was rerouted into the development of techniques for the standardization and quantitative control of the vagaries of human vision.

Eliasson's work is equally committed to instigating flexible and reversible temporalities; following Bergson, he sees reality as either in the process of being made or unmaking itself. "Becoming is infinitely varied" wrote Bergson in *Creative Evolution*, "That which goes from yellow to green is not like that which goes from green to blue: they are different qualitative movements....An infinite multiplicity of becomings, variously colored, passes before our eyes." It's well known that Bergson has been an significant influence on Eliasson's thinking but what he finds compelling in this great French philosopher does not seem to be the currently fashionable image of Bergson as the anticipator of cinematic time or of the non-linear sciences. Rather, the ramifications of Your colour memory seems more intimately tied to an understanding that Bergson's profound time of lived experience, with all its richness and potentially for the new, concerned the time of human sharing in whether in sympathy, love or friendship. What we discover in the oval space of this astonishing work is both the singularity and the fragility of our own perception, of our own experience. The public nature of the work makes inescapable the realization that a world in common, the possibility of community, must be the exploratory coming together of singularities in many small-scale acts of sharing and exchange. In this sense the piece finally is not about vision or color but about the possibilities of communication – where communication is not the transmission of messages or images but an act or ethos of sharing. That human activity of attentiveness to the other and awareness of the proximity of the other's experience is at least an anticipation of hoped-for communities in the making. Part of Eliasson's luminous vocabulary is not unrelated to that tradition, extending from Meister Eckhart to Hegel, in which self-illumination is a figuration of the historical process toward world-illumination and its promises. But in a radically different direction he shows ways in which the materiality of light and its techniques can be relocated from any quasi-theological connotations onto the immanence of local, non-hierarchical practices of invention and wonder.

This text is commissioned by Arcadia University Art Gallery on the occasion of the presentation of *Your colour memory*.

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