

Projects 73 : Olafur Eliasson : the Museum of Modern Art New York, September 13, 2001-May 21, 2001

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Author

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projects **73** olafur eliasson

The Museum of Modern Art New York

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phenomenological investigations

Asked to describe his work, Olafur Eliasson would reply point-blank: "My work is you—the spectator."¹ Capsizing the classical situation in which the viewer contemplates an art object, Eliasson enlists the viewer as a participant in the aesthetic makeup of his practice. The installation *Seeing yourself sensing* (2001), conceived for The Museum of Modern Art's Garden Hall windows, provokes a body-conscious response to space and architecture that probes the potential of human perceptual processes. A total of fifty sheets of striped pellucid and mirrored glass extend over the Garden Hall facade on the first two floors, producing an experiential field in constant flux that unsettles the habitual dichotomy of interior/exterior and perceiver/perceived. Eliasson's premise is our phenomenological engagement with the artwork. Activated by the presence of one or more viewers, this installation changes with our own shifts in space and investigations in real time. By changing our physical position we implicitly change our viewpoint, thus perceiving the work diversely and also disrupting and reordering its previous structure. Differently put, we continuously affect our surroundings, engendering new cognitive situations.

Here, our eye alternates between looking outside into The Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Sculpture Garden—now in a state of motility, under construction—and looking back inside at the deployment of a space fragmented and multiplied into many mirroring images. We engage in the play-tactics of reflections and become aware of ourselves, our performing bodies, our gazes, and, not least, the gazes of others. Watching ourselves look, we uncover the ways we see and, in turn, observe ourselves being observed. Perceptions interface and morph in endless volleys, a process Eliasson defines as "seeing yourself sensing." Marking a radical break with the Cartesian scopic regime, which prevailed in Western culture from the Renaissance into the first decades of the twentieth century, Eliasson presents perception not as universal and autonomous, but as it is lived in the world. Perception manifests itself as embodied in a specific context or situation, grounded in circumstance. Conversely, just as perception does not exist in and of itself, our surroundings cease to be present without us.

Then, again, all this may be considered in reverse. Eliasson likes to think about the paradox of the deflected gaze. What does it mean for the viewer to see herself from the outside—let's say, from the perspective of another person? What does it mean to observe oneself from the vantage point of the space one occupies? Or from the outlook of the city? Or of other surroundings? Eliasson refers to the story of "a space with a chair in it." It goes like this: "When there are no people in the space, there is also no chair; and if there are two people in the space with one chair, then there are two chairs. Then, if there is one person and no chair the interesting question arises: is the person in the space?"² *Seeing yourself sensing* addresses the antinomies of perception: the idiosyncratic rapport between viewer and object (for instance, the situation in which two people looking at any one object signifies that there are two objects, not one), and the objective scope of subjective seeing (for instance, the situation in which the spectator perceives herself being looked back at by an object). This Brechtian distancing exercise explains why perception involves a state of consciousness that challenges the innocence of space

as well as the notion of a universal viewing subject. To see oneself in the third person is to see actively, to see critically, to see through the frame. There are various frames through which one looks at an artwork, including the institutional construction of space and the discursive practices surrounding it. Surroundings are not only natural—they are also social, cultural, and ideological.

Eliasson's perceptual inquiries can be traced back to his student years at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Copenhagen. Exposed to theoretical phenomenology—the writings of Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty—he began experimenting with visual phenomena, testing the real and its conventions. Light, space, and time have often functioned as prime building blocks. For instance, in *Your sun machine*, installed in 1997 in an art gallery in Santa Monica, Eliasson cut a circular hole in the roof, letting the light flood in and rotate across the walls and floor during the course of the day, punctuating duration. The empty gallery space read as a monitoring chamber engineered to chart the movement of the solar orb, but its effect actually derived from the way we tend to observe other forms in the universe from our own position on earth. Although the sun may seem to be moving out there, it is in fact our own astronomical spin around it that makes it appear the way that it does. The piece prompted us to rethink perception in terms of the subject's mobility in space, but also to take into account the full sensorial dimension of vision and its potential for criticality. *Your sun machine* called to mind projects by California "light and space" artists Robert Irwin, Maria Nordman, Douglas Wheeler, and, especially, James Turrell, whose skyspaces from the 1970s similarly explore the light-time ratio, the motion of the earth in space, and the ways in which human beings engage the world with their visual systems. The difference, however, is that Eliasson's objective, here as elsewhere in his practice, is not just to prospect the zone of the phenomenal, but also to investigate broader philosophical questions about the link between vision and truth, sensation and interpretation.

Made of light, or cognate elements such as water, fog, ice, mist, and fire, Eliasson's installations conjure up physical phenomena. They appear to be "natural," yet oddly are not—invariably, they are artificially induced. For instance, *360-degree expectation* (2001) consisted of a circular room, thirty-three feet in diameter. The only element in the room besides the viewer was a lens salvaged from a lighthouse, in which a halogen bulb had been set. The gyratory lens projected a circle of ethereal light that moved up and down onto the surrounding walls like a horizon line. A makeshift mechanical gear created an uncannily cosmic sensation. At the level of affect, the authentic and the artificial became interchangeable, though nothing disguised the technical intervention. The reason a simulated phenomenon, such as the ersatz horizon line, can look real, is because we tend to naturalize the real world to the point where it begins to resemble its own representation. Stirred up by images of his native Scandinavia, Eliasson's indoor rainbows, double sunsets, fabricated geysers, reversed waterfalls, and ice fields for tropical countries emphasize not the wonders of nature, but, on the contrary, the ways in which cultural sites mediate our perception of pure processes. By making visible the mechanics of his works and laying bare the artifice of the illusion, Eliasson points to the elliptical relationship between reality, perception, and the representation of the real. Yet even as his work exposes the technologies that structure natural processes, it still fosters an indelible emotion—"perhaps even with connotations of the sublime," Madeleine Grynsztejn notes—an emotion that is embedded in human agency.³

What, then, is ultimately at stake in Eliasson's work? It is a quest neither for nature nor for culture, but a movement toward the renewal of subjective perceptual experience. Perhaps this explains why the titles of his installations often introduce the possessive pronoun "your" to articulate something that belongs to the beholder—her point of view. If the artist devises the environments, it is you, the viewer, who activates them; and it is your visual experience that in the end completes the work. Eliasson's paradigms for perceptual criticality are "seeing yourself seeing" and "seeing yourself sensing." What begins as perception returns to affect the structures of society. Accordingly, perception functions as an agent of consciousness that evolves from a concern with things seen to that of seeing oneself. The prospect of ocular agency has many implications, most notably, an engagement with unpredictability. Because everything in our society is organized to avoid surprises, experiencing "the value of something that's unpredictable," Eliasson reasons, "can also be seen as a critique of society."⁴

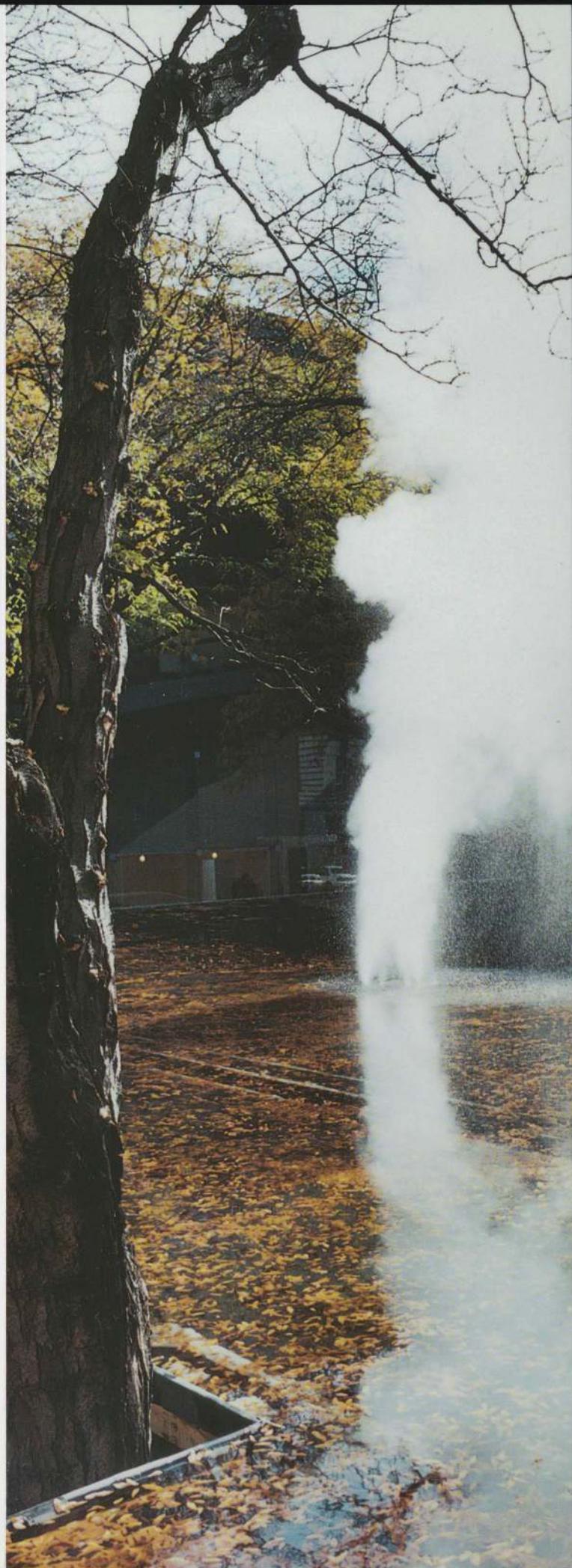
Informed by the discursive practices and social analyses of Michael Asher, Gordon Matta-Clark, and Dan Graham, Eliasson conceives situations that disrupt the normative exhibition conventions of galleries and museums. The institutional tendency is to disassociate the space of art from the outer world, and to display art "objectively," with an eye for "truth." Set against this grain, Eliasson's experiential spaces seek to enhance human sensory faculties and to restore a sense of subjective criticality to perception. A work by Eliasson is not an object per se, but rather a process that is constantly redefined by the viewer. In *Your now is my surroundings* (2000), Eliasson literally turned the space of the Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York, inside out by removing the glass panels from the skylight overhead, yet preserving the latticed metal frame, which reiterated itself in mirrors strategically placed on walls at eye level. The installation was activated only when viewers entered the space. Looking around, participants saw a fragmented, disorienting mirror world that seemed to exist both inside the gallery and outside, in the city. They saw themselves from different angles, bodiless, their unanchored gazes endlessly self-replicated. They felt a breeze and heard the sounds of the city. Reality—as in the social world—was "here and now," present in all its multiplicity, epiphany, contingency, and intense immediacy. Aesthetic experience, Eliasson's work attests, is a process of exchange between the viewing subject, the art construct, and the context, rather than any fixed endpoint of such a process.

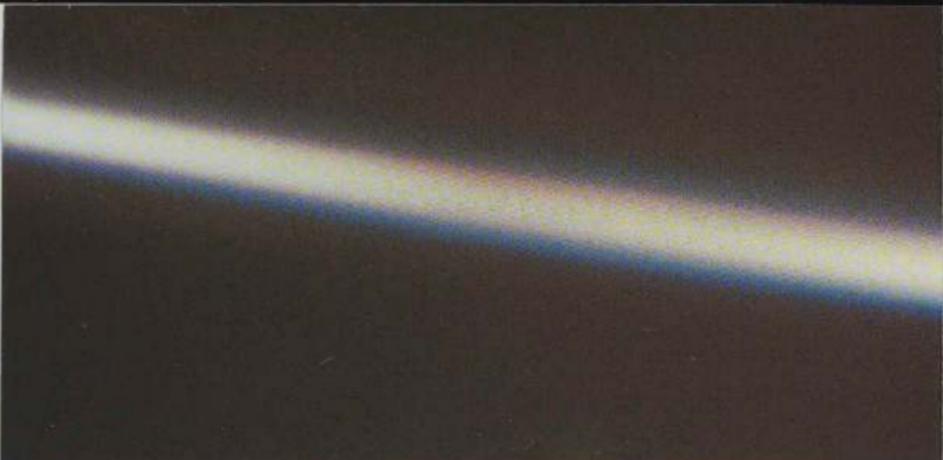
Roxana Marcoci, Department of Painting and Sculpture,
and Claudia Schmuckli, Department of the Chief Curator at Large

notes

- 1 Conversation with the artist, August 2000.
- 2 Olafur Eliasson and Jessica Morgan, *Your only real thing is time* (Boston: Institute of Contemporary Art, 2001): 22.
- 3 Madeleine Grynsztejn, *Carnegie International 1999/2000* (Pittsburgh: Carnegie Museum of Art, 1999): 102.
- 4 Leslie Camhi, "And the Artist Recreated Nature (or an Illusion of It)," *New York Times*, January 21, 2001, sec. 2, 35.

Right: *Your natural denudation inverted*. 1999. Installation: Wood, rubber, water, steam, and existing architecture (Sculpture Courtyard, Carnegie Museum of Art), 8 x 48 x 83'. Courtesy Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York, and neugerriemschneider, Berlin. Photo: Richard A. Stoner



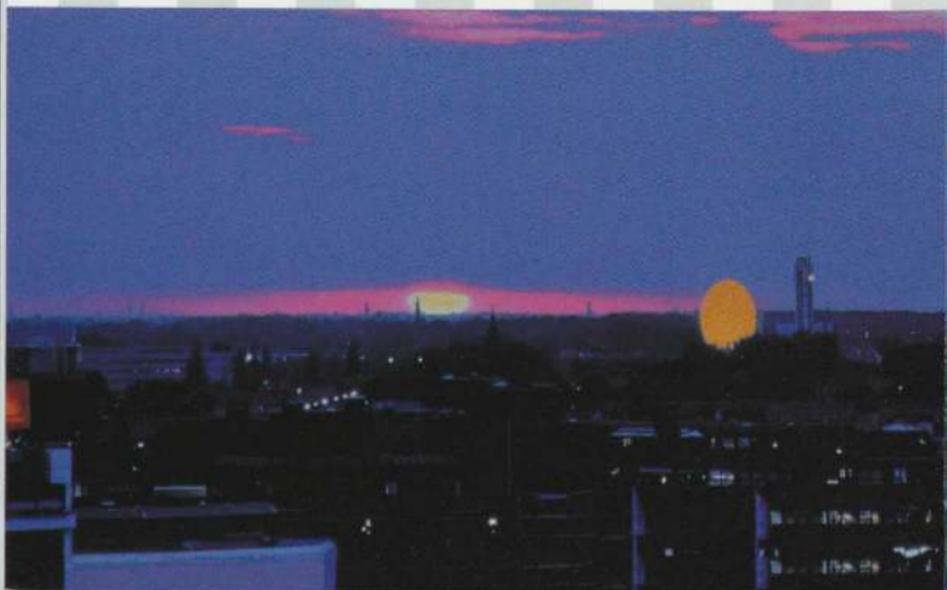


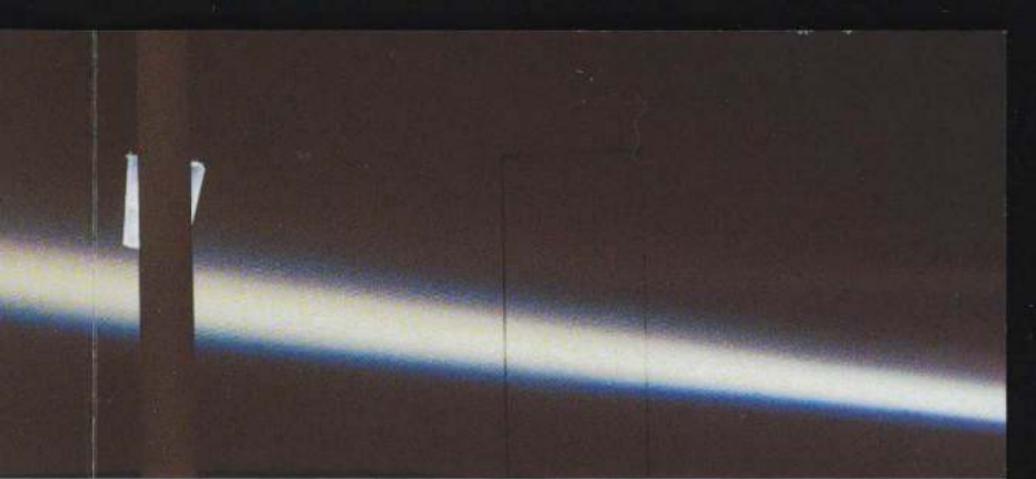
seeing yourself sensing

Hi there landscape! I say—and look. In front of me, at first, a flat dark area with some water or marshy spots, until the jumpwide stream delimits the small brown elevations with knee-high birches. Behind them, more hills and more colors. Different small trees but mostly moss. Further away, different light, higher slopes, and more yellow colors. Shadows from even higher mountains shading the valleys. And finally the mountains, furthest away, bright with the colors and lit by the sun, not really high but distinctly organized in the background panorama, fitting well under the white sky. Hi Olafur! I answer for the landscape.

By now I can tell approximately how far it is to the second row of hills or to the mountains further away. I can estimate how much time and what effort it would take to go from here to there. I can tell if the water in the stream runs faster than I can walk, and that by the time I get to the mountain the sun will be low and that it would have been better to walk up the western side of the mountain to enjoy the evening heat. If I want to take photos while walking up the mountain I should go up the eastern shaded side, so that the landscape is lit from behind. I believe that at the foot of the mountains, not visible from here, there is a glacier river, which I would have to wade through. Even though I don't fancy the cold water, I have got some sense of where and where not to go. Where there is a stone and where there is a hole under the water. And if the river is too large to wade through, I imagine that further away, at the outspring, there is a small glacier tongue, and envisioning it (although sometimes I'm wrong) I can see which is the safer path up and down the ice, with the smaller crevasses, and so on.

I am not trying to advertise the little experience I have had over the years. In the hiking and trekking world I am an absolute novice and will probably stay one for ever. But what I want to say here is that after visiting the same type of landscape several times, I have achieved a level of orientation. I can determine the





approximate height of the hills and the slope angle, estimate the time it takes to get there, and try to use the weather to my benefit. As with the cityscape, I can relate to the landscape—not as an image, but as a space. So what is it that I have come to know? Is it nature? Nature as such has no essence—no truthful secrets to reveal. I have not got closer to anything essential outside of myself and, finally, isn't nature a cultural state anyway? Talk to me about cultivating nature into landscapes. . . . 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 has been exercised)—is my ability to see and sense and move through the landscapes surrounding me. So looking at nature, I don't find anything out there . . . I find my own relation to the spaces, or aspects of my relation to it. We see nature with our cultivated eyes. Again, there is no true nature, there is only your and my construct of such.

Just by looking at nature, we cultivate it into an image. You could call that image a landscape. The museum presents itself to us as a place for art. For a while now, it has been meaningless to speak of objective, autonomous conditions. This is not only vis-à-vis art objects, but also exhibitions and the museum's position in society in general. As in many other fields, the acknowledgment of this has meant that the whole notion of orientation and observation has changed. Even in physics the subatomic particles can no longer be subjected to a causal description in time and space. Exercising the integration of the spectator, or rather, the spectating itself, as part of the museum's undertaking, has shifted the weight from the thing experienced to looking at the experience itself. We stage the artifacts, but more importantly, we stage the way the artifacts are perceived. We cultivate nature into landscapes. So to elude the museum's insistence that there is a nature (so long as you look hard enough for it), it is crucial not only to acknowledge that the experience itself is part of the process, but more importantly, that experience is presented undisguised to the spectator. Otherwise, our most generous ability to see ourselves seeing, to evaluate and criticize ourselves and our relation to space, has failed, and thus so has the museum's socializing potential.



The Museum of Modern Art, one of the most highly esteemed museums in the world today, is at the moment partly a construction site. I would like to think of the awareness of this architectural intervention, including the construction site, as part of my project, and use this moment of megamuseomaniac instability as an occasion for visitors to take on the eyes of the museum and look back—at themselves. To reverse the perspective: the museum as the subject, and the spectator, the object. To see that, like a landscape, the museum is also a construct—that in spite of its comprehensive and far-reaching role as a truthful myth, it can indeed have social potential. Seeing yourself sensing.

Olafur Eliasson



The Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Sculpture Garden (under construction). June 2001
Photo: Roxana Marcoci

biography

Olafur Eliasson

Born 1967 in Copenhagen, Denmark. Lives and works in Berlin
Education 1989–95 Royal Academy of Fine Arts, Copenhagen

selected solo exhibitions

- 2001 *Your only real thing is time*
The Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston
Surroundings surrounded
Zentrum für Kunst und Medientechnologie, Karlsruhe, Germany
- 2000 *Your now is my surroundings*
Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York
Your intuitive surroundings versus your surrounded intuition
The Art Institute of Chicago

acknowledgments

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Top left: *360-degree expectation*. 2001. Halogen bulb and beacon lens, circular room, 33' diam. Installation view, The Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston. Courtesy Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York, and neugerriemschneider, Berlin

Bottom left: *The double sunset*. 1999. Twenty 2000-watt xenon lamps, yellow corrugated metal, and metal scaffolding, 184 x 125' diam. Installation view, Central Museum Utrecht, The Netherlands. Courtesy Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York, and neugerriemschneider, Berlin

Bottom right: *Your now is my surroundings*. 2000. Mirror, skylight, concrete tiles, drain pipe, drywall, and insulation, 25' 8" x 6' 10 1/2" x 13'. Courtesy Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York, and neugerriemschneider, Berlin