

Olafur Eliasson: Surroundings Surround - Essays on Space and Science: Petr Verbeel and Olafur Eliasson (Hrsg.), Karlsruhe 2009

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During the 1996 group exhibition "Remote Connections," Olafur Eliasson, whose work we had become acquainted with in Berlin's neugerriemschneider gallery, showed for the first time at the New Gallery of the State Museum of Joanneum.<sup>1</sup> He chose one of the most privileged and most difficult rooms of the New Gallery: the Mirror Hall. Produced relatively simply, yet to great effect, his light installation, *The Organic and the Crystalline Description*, constituted a central work of this group exhibition and was later reproduced repeatedly in diverse publications. After that we followed his astonishing international career, and by 1998, we decided to invite him to stage his first major solo exhibition in a museum. Up until this time, those interested in his art only had the chance to see individual works included in prominent group shows. It seemed important to us to display the large ensembles and groups of works by the artist in their totality, in order to better present Olafur Eliasson's intentions to the public. Owing to construction problems in the New Gallery, the exhibition was delayed for a year, which gave the artist the opportunity to produce many new works expressly for this show. The minute details of the exhibition were conceived during numerous conversations in Graz and Berlin. The precision of Olafur Eliasson's planning, as well as his operational competence, was already striking and evident in the way he invented this comprehensive exhibit with its logistical and technical difficulties.

This exhibition offered an introductory *parcours* through all the fields of work and the methods that Olafur Eliasson deals with in his installations: the factors of human perception in an age of technology and the laws of nature from the perspective of their anthropological relativity. His work addresses the question of our conception of nature and the technical aids that we use to observe, construct, and measure it.

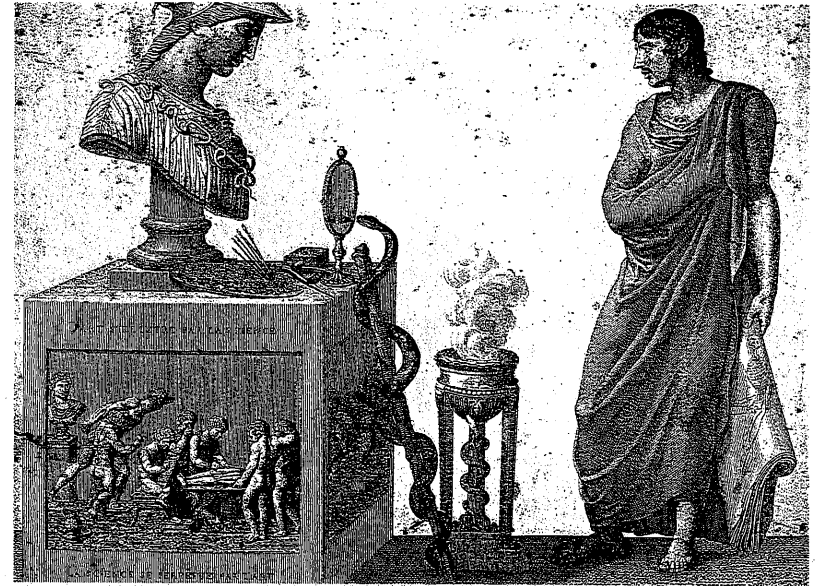
Nature has long been a testing ground, even a battlefield for human beings. Romanticism wanted to rescue nature from mankind by anti-scientific means. The ecology movement wants

1. *Remote Connections. Media Art in the Era of Displacement*, ed. Ammon Barzel, Neue Galerie Landesmuseum Joanneum, steirischer herbst 96, Graz, Austria.

2. Bruno Latour, *Science in Action*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1987.

to do this in scientific fashion. Olafur Eliasson takes up both impulses and develops a new artistic strategy by displaying nature as the testing ground and the construct of science. His foil is not reality but natural science. Instead of addressing a pre-scientific or premediated perception of nature, his installations deal exclusively with phenomena of nature as natural science has made them analytically accessible to us. He

*L'art s'illustre par la science, la science se perpétue par l'art*  
(Art illustrated by science, science perpetuating itself through art)



displays nature as artificially constructed by natural science under laboratory conditions in the laboratory of the museum. It is not just a case of a science exhibition in a "science center," but rather the artistic observation of science at work. This scientific labor in the laboratory (in the sense of Bruno Latour<sup>2</sup>) is astonishingly attractive. The laboratory emerges as a place not only of knowledge but also of enjoyment. In the individual cabinets of the museum, the observer experiences a sequence of perplexing phenomena, unexpected sensations, and impressions. The scientific laboratory within the museum is a place of

Engraving by Jean Marie Leroux after a drawing by Jean Galbert Salvage. *Anatomie du Gladiateur Combattant, applicable aux Beaux Arts, ou Traité des os, des muscles, des proportions et des caractères du Corps Humaine*, Paris 1812, Neue Galerie am Landesmuseum Joanneum, Graz, Austria

wonder and desire. Museum halls become rooms for experience, in which the observer witnesses nature under scientific conditions. Nature appears as a kind of anthology of special effects, transposed from the virtual world back into the world of our natural senses.

Our constructions of nature change throughout the course of history, parallel to social, ideological, technical, and other changes. Physical structures themselves are not free from social determinations and socialized possibilities, because the apparatuses of perception and measurement determine which physical structures we recognize, as well as what we recognize as physical structures. Often, cultural models appear natural to the individual, such that they are falsely believed objective characteristics of our natural environment. The apparently purely physical experiments with the four elements – water, fire, earth, and air, and the light and color that derive from them – are thus, in reality, also experiments with our patterns of perception, and our models of the environment, our social structures. Via his apparatuses for perceiving reality, Eliasson establishes empirical connections among reality, perception, and represented reality in a straightforward way. By means of cultural techniques, he transforms natural processes (the waterfall flows upward instead of down). In this way, nature becomes, hypothetically, a product of civilisation. The difference between a natural environment and an anthropomorphic system is not differentiated from within, but from the outside. Surroundings are not folded inward, but rather encircled from the outside. The environs become a system. "Surroundings" are "surrounded." The traditional difference between nature and culture, and the drawing of their boundaries, is questioned.

Eliasson succeeded in transposing his artistic universe into the circumscribed topography of Graz's New Gallery in the twelve first-floor rooms and in the inner courtyard. He transformed the *parcours* through the New Gallery and the inner courtyard into one of his favorite *topoi*, almost into a *torus*. The first room was a curtain of sprayed water whose drops appeared to the viewer, through stroposcopic light-projection, to be transformed into crystals, suspended in the air. The last room was a wind installation with sixteen ventilators, *Your windless arrangement* (1997) (Malmö Museum of Art, Malmö, Sweden), which seemed to suck the visitor not only into the inner room, but also out of it. The exit door remained open during exhibition times so that the staircase led one to

the ground floor and worked like a wind tunnel. When visitors left this wind tunnel and walked out of the exhibition into the open air of the courtyard, they stood in front of a giant, artificial waterfall, whose tumultuous thunder could be heard throughout the entire tour of the exhibition. Thus, the path led through the four elements with their configurations of material and light (solid, liquid, gaseous), from water to water.

One year later, in his significantly expanded major solo-exhibition in Karlsruhe's Center for Art and Media (ZKM), Eliasson similarly charted a new concept for exhibiting, which involved the topography of the building. In this show, which stretches throughout the entire exhibition space in atrium 8 and 9, the Center for Art and Media (ZKM) presents Eliasson's copious work to the public. The artist, who has appeared at the Venice Biennale in 1999, was nominated for the prize in Contemporary Art by the National Gallery in Berlin in 2000. Shown together with early works, are works created especially for this exhibition. A system of denser and dissipated alternating zones leads the observer in a periodic fashion through Eliasson's work-fields. The exhibition of these new fields of action and communication platforms, as well as other larger individual pieces, is made possible by the size of the Center's atriums. On display, for example, are an artificial ice-field, *The very large ice-floor* (1998), the circle of color, *Tell me about your miraculous invention* (2000), the horizon line, *360 degree expectations* (2001), a cover of light, *Yet untitled* (2000), and a mirrored cathedral, *Wonderland Dome* (2000). Eliasson planned this exhibition, too, with his customary precision.

The question of the catalogue was open for discussion at the very start of exhibition planning. Early on, Eliasson expressed the wish to publish not a conventional catalogue documenting his work but rather to have his work surrounded by scholarly commentaries. Together with Peter Weibel, he produced a list of the various spheres of work and possible authors. By the end of this process, it emerged that Eliasson actually did not want any art-historical commentaries; instead, the work should remain without commentary and function as an insert or interface to the individual chapters. An anthology of scholarly texts, partly already published, partly written for this publication, intended to provide insights into the ways in which Eliasson operates. The scholarly texts are to constitute the foil, a kind of material collection of the horizon, in light of which a deeper understanding of Eliasson's work would be

possible. This book is an innovative project, because the exclusivity with which art theory and art criticism are renounced renders possible a new alliance between science and art, and documents how the two, as parallel worlds, cross over into each other with equal justification and do not exist as divided cultures (C. P. Snow, *The Two Cultures*, 1959). It is indeed Olafur Eliasson's art which allows for an optimal intersection of science and art, because he does not take nature as his point of departure but rather science, which explains nature for us, namely, natural science. His art is a kind of meta-science, which appropriates and reflects the findings of natural science, and transforms them into art, into aesthetic experience, and into sensual experience. This new alliance between science and art is the manifest element of a paradigm shift which introduces entirely new paths and options for twenty-first century art. As a result, you have in front of you a book which not only offers an almost encyclopaedic insight into science and the terrains of its problems such as space, but also into the implicated problematics of the most topical contemporary art, which is oriented to the future. It thereby also provides an overview of Olafur Eliasson's artistic universe. The singularity of this book is this: scientists speak for art, and thus we provide a retort to the Science Wars.<sup>3</sup>

The gauntlet thrown in the face of artists and philosophers by the science warriors responsible for igniting Science Wars is now disarmed. This disarmament is taking place, because it has been demonstrated that art and science can share the same terrain, even though their products are different. A new alliance resides in this sharing.

The brilliance of the contributions by significant authors and their readiness to cooperate on this unusual project not only fills our two institutions with gratitude and admiration, it also confirms for the art and science communities that they are not strangers to one another: on the contrary, they are reliant upon one another. Thanks to the generous efforts of the authors, an extraordinary volume of materials and a book has come into being that is unparalleled in the context of art or science. What holds is not *ars gratia artis*, but rather "*scientia sine arte nihil est - ars sine scientia nihil est*" (Jean Vignot, 1392).

Christa Steinle,  
Peter Weibel

3. Alan Sokal and Jean Bricmont, *Fashionable Nonsense: Postmodern Intellectuals' Abuse of Science*. Picador, New York, 1988; *Science Wars*, Andrew Ross (ed.), Duke University Press, Durham and London, 1996.

