

Awaiting the Disaster:
Olafur Eliasson's
The Weather Project

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The sun, from the human point of view (in other words, as it is confused with the notion of noon) is the most elevated conception. It is also the most abstract object, since it is impossible to look at fixedly at that time of day. If we describe the notion of the sun in the mind of one whose weak eyes compel him to emasculate it, that sun must be said to have the poetic meaning of mathematical serenity and spiritual elevation. If on the other hand one obstinately focuses on it, a certain madness is implied, and the notion changes meaning because it is no longer production that appears in light, but refuse or combustion, adequately expressed by the horror emanating from a brilliant arc lamp. (Bataille 1985, 57)

Olafur Eliasson's *The Weather Project* at the Tate Modern's Turbine Hall (October 2003-March 2004) is a commanding installation of a giant, glowing sphere: an indoor sun with a luminous thrall. Eliasson's body of work consistently explores phenomenological experiences of the natural environment within interior gallery spaces. This paper will push the implications of these interests to an extreme and suggest that *The Weather Project* intimates what is a limit point of environmental interactions: the sun as disaster, the disaster as sun. That is, the root of the sun in the word disaster, a pejorative inflection of *astre*. This inflection of disaster is "an unpropitious or baleful aspect of a planet or star; malevolent influence of a heavenly body; hence, an ill portent."¹ By recalling this relatively obscure etymological origin of disaster, it is possible to read Eliasson's project as a metaphor for the disaster, specific and yet unspecified, in culture and the environment. This exhibit enacts the weight of the disaster-not-yet: what happens when the disaster does not happen? The disaster is that which "is rather always already past, and yet we are on the edge or under the threat" (Blanchot 1995, 1). The exhibit creates a unique locality within the gallery, a meditation on the demands the abiding disaster makes on the subject.

Our knowledge of place is frequently defined through both presence and absence. The city offers a perpetual play of the tangible and unknown. To think of the disaster through the specificity of locality is uniquely difficult as the disaster is that which exceeds frames of reference and forms of knowledge. The space of disaster is the most extreme confrontation — it is

the very obliteration of place and the dissolution of community. Disaster thrives on malignant social and political structures, and feeds on the vagaries of greed and oppression. Yet it is also the unpredictable, the inexplicable, and the accident. The locality of disaster is both the tenuous bond made in the aftermath of disaster as well as the annihilation the disaster holds in stead. The disaster is where the double edge of the inflections of locality meet, the simultaneous space of that which is corrosive and impenetrable as well as that which is collective and recuperative — the actions of community healing and grief. For example, in the wake of local tragedies, from car accidents to massacres, communities create spontaneous memorials marking the site of tragedy. This process of leaving cards, flowers, candles, and toys is both a form of “mourning in protest” at the egregious circumstances of death as well as a temporary “sacralization of public space” (Senie 1999, 27). In terms of the gallery environment, the pairing of creative intervention with the space of disaster is an uneasy conjunction and yet a necessary intersection.

By means of the materials of nature such as water, earth, light, and wind, Olafur Eliasson’s installation projects recreate aspects of the natural world. He does not establish a simple opposition between nature and culture, but rather explores the dynamic intersection of both concepts through the phenomenological experience of the work. His exhibit *The mediated motion* (2001) at the Kunsthau Bregenz is characteristic in this respect. In collaboration with the landscape architect Günther Vogt, each floor of the gallery was dedicated to a different type of landscape installation: the ground floor, a series of tree trunks that, when watered daily, sprouted edible mushrooms; the first floor, an indoor pond covered with an ever increasing layer of duckweed scum; the second floor, a layer of earthen floor made of clay; the third, a suspension bridge traversing a room filled with manufactured mist. The design of the exhibit attentively responded to the architecturally acclaimed building by Peter Zumthor. Eliasson’s installations drew attention to the environmentally sensitive, innovative yet minimalist, design. Zumthor’s use of natural light and attention to material became an essential element of the exhibit; for example, the natural light and climate made the proliferation of the duckweed pond surface possible. Furthermore, the exhibit encouraged a heightened awareness of how visitors to the gallery follow a circular path of movement charted by the building design. Time and perception, the time of perception, becomes the method for evaluating how each slice of natural process shapes and becomes shaped by the gallery and its visitors.

In the catalogue introduction to *The mediated motion* Eliasson speaks of the centrality of motion and the moment of sensation to the exhibit experience;



Olafur Eliasson, *The Weather Project*, 2003, Tate Modern, London.
Photo: Dennis Lago

the entire show is working toward “exposing and integrating our movements into the exhibition in a way that enables you to sense what you know and to know what you sense” (Eliasson 2001, 11). The artist regards his work as an interrogation of the frames and materials that structure our perceptions. He situates motion and mediation as an instant of place-making, and locates the relevance of his work to the simultaneity of meanings at stake in the urban environment. As he comments:

Our city surroundings have been planned to mediate us. Taking advantage of our memory to organize our expectations, outdoor landscape and city spaces have a long tradition of using movement as a generator of space. The city mediated with safety, eliminating surprises, creating pre-dictable surroundings (traffic control and shopping malls), or the city as socializing potential where less-predictable (multi-purpose) surroundings let you enjoy the hospitality of presence (11).

In projects like *The mediated motion*, Eliasson addresses the idiosyncrasies of space as place and the perpetual interaction of forms of control and forms of fluidity. *The Weather Project* takes these principles to an extreme manifestation.

The premise of *The Weather Project* is at once very simple; a large indoor sun hangs at the end of the gallery. The sun is created out of hundreds of mono-frequency lamps — the sort of bulbs used for street lighting — veiled by a screen. The low frequency light limits the colours emitted to yellow and black, thus creating a brilliant duotone contrast between the immediate light and the surrounding area. The sun is not a complete sphere, only an illusion of such. The top-half of the rounded form is a reflection from the mirrored ceiling. The mirrors run the entire length of the space, giving the illusion of a much taller, grander interior. A fine mist permeates the room, captures the light, and heightens the dramatic character of the installation. The mist is released into the space at timed intervals decided by the artist. Depending on the time of day, the density of the vapour changes, clouds form and clouds dissipate.

The project is a representation of the natural elements of our environment — a reinterpretation of sun and sky, and an interrogation of the process and perception of the weather. The sun exudes light and warmth, and visitors frequently sit on the floor to bask under the electric heat. A temporary community of gallery visitors forms in a unique fashion similar to that of a public park. The gallery transforms into another coalition predicated on the mutual experience of a fabricated environment. The dreariness of winter London outside finds its antidote within the gallery. The viewer usually enters from the west, steadily approaching the radiant object from afar; it is

to glance up and to move forward, to feel the heat and experience the piercing light that is only ever stronger as you approach the globe. The atmosphere is daunting, sensuous and even sacred, but the overall design creates a space of ambiguity. The “sky” is a reflection of the ground, the mist recalls both dawn and dusk, and the sun seems to be both rising and falling.

With its evocative light and evanescent mist, the exhibit has a distinctly Romantic sensibility, yet it also foregrounds its own elements of construction as the wires, bulbs, and screen that create the sun are clearly visible, as well as the machines that produce the vapour. The mirror establishes the illusion of seamlessness with awareness that there is no such unity. The exhibit at once embraces and refuses the transcendental character of Romanticism, a duality perhaps most present in the project’s gesture toward the sublime. That is, the sun as object that rejects the gaze, that cannot be looked at, and yet within the gallery, it is. The exhibit dares one to look and as such, it emphasizes that looking is not without risk or responsibility. We are reminded to “never stare directly at the sun.” The Romantic inflection of the piece positions the sublime and the place of natural terror and natural disaster within the sphere of human action and human cultivation — the art gallery. The exhibit takes place in the now technologically obsolete turbine room, a ruin of technology past. The hall was the previous place of energy production and consumption. The sun becomes a glance to the past, again Blanchot’s disaster “already past,” and a look to the future “under threat” in new forms and capacities. Global warming? Perhaps. Energy and excess? Somewhat, but rather it is precisely the abstract and unknown at the edge of awe and destruction that brings forth an important series of questions regarding the locality of the gallery and the place of the subject.

The quotation from Bataille’s “Rotten Sun” (1985) at the start of this essay writes of the sun as aporia. To challenge its gaze is to realize the compelling light of creation as combustion rather than creation as production. The sun offers the dual possibility of spirituality and madness with mythological precedence in sources such as the myth of Icarus. The sun shines at the peak of elevation and brilliance to draw Icarus into its awe, and it provides for a “sudden fall of unheard-of violence” (58). The wax melts, the wings detach, and Icarus plunges into the water below. Bataille implicitly realizes in his meditation the disaster of the sun that is part of its origin. Yet the work of etymology brings one no closer to the difficult knowledge of disaster; the word itself must fail in its signification: “the etymology of disaster does not operate...as a preferred, or more original insight, ensuring mastery of what is no longer, then, anything but a word” (Blanchot 1995, 116). This breakdown of language is part of the thrust of disaster that just exceeds our grasp, and that is the most radical challenge to self and knowledge. This art

installation can only intimate the disaster — the sun is frozen, abstract. The mist marks time only to heighten the stasis of the sun. To approach the sun is a movement forward that is also on the brink. The dare of the disaster is a beseeching, demanding immobility.

Blanchot's *The Writing of the Disaster* ends with a glance to the sky, and with a fragment from another work. A repetition that recalls the disaster that is the sun: "*shining solitude, the void of the sky, a deferred death: disaster*" (1995, 146). Eliasson's sun realizes the inconsolable and incessant. It is a mark of the abiding threat, disguised and deferred that rests, disastrously, unnoticed and unacknowledged. At once, memory of the disaster is made impossible in this instance. It is abstracted, removed from any point of reference. And yet it is immediate and marked by the engagement of the subject both through the corporeal experience of the exhibit and the design of the space. The length of mirror places the viewer in the scene. We see ourselves as part of the relation of the disaster in the world. As visitors to the gallery, we become subjects in the scene as the exhibit foregrounds the act of becoming in and through space. For example, the density of the mist is always changing and at times gently obscures the reflections below. At other moments, the mirror as an image of the world is much clearer; the gallery participants exist as small yet patent traces in the expansive room.

Rather than view the mirror in terms of Narcissus or simulacrum, it is possible to emphasize how it obliges us to recognize ourselves — as selves and others, ourselves as others — in the space. The installation makes clear the dynamic of the disaster, its recurrence and its threat, as one intimately related to our relation to the Other. Through the mirror that unifies the space, we are reminded that the disaster is always a question of responsibility and reciprocity, and its return a facet of power. The Other displaces and interrupts the subject just as the disaster is the most radical disruption of subjectivity. This is the nature of the demand made on the individual; the challenge of reciprocity is that the Other assumes my place and must inhabit my space of proximity and difference: "The Other, if he calls upon me, calls upon someone who is not I.... The responsibility with which I am charged is not mine and causes me not to be I" (Blanchot 1995, 18). This accountability is the most precarious state of resistance and loss, the pull of the disaster and its destruction, as well as possibility of mutual interaction. The only means of engaging the imminent threat of the disaster is through awareness of otherness, which in turn means inhabiting the space of responsibility in which I, without force or demand, relinquish my subjectivity in place of another's: "My responsibility for the Other presupposes an over-turning such that it can only be marked by a change in the status of 'me,' a change in time and perhaps in language" (25). The extension of such is the

equal gesture of irresponsibility and ambivalence, the desire for something other, to be somewhere other, and to accept yet a different form of loss. The ambiguity of the design returns through the innate ambivalence within both responsibility and reciprocity of which the disaster always adheres and with which we must always contend.

We are reminded, “We do not repel the earth, to which, in any event, we belong; but we do not make of it a refuge, or even of dwelling upon it a beautiful obligation, *for terrible is the earth*. The disaster, always belated — the disaster, strangled sleep — could remind us of this, if there were memory of the immemorable” (Blanchot 1995, 114). And so we must consider, what are the means of making dwelling a beautiful obligation? The creative re-inscription of the disaster is a point for re-imagining the nature of place and community, the flux of space and precarious localities, and the forms of responsibility that determine the disaster in abeyance. The glowing sun in a gallery or the flowers left at a street side memorial become forms of intervention that create alternative localities of contemplation and inhabitation — a counterpoint to the rupture and excess of disaster through weighted actions and immediate bonds.

Notes

- 1 *Webster's Revised Unabridged Dictionary*, 1996.

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