Bringing the Weather Inside: Olafur Eliasson’s The Weather Project
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Olafur Eliasson’s The Weather Project was exhibited in the Turbine Hall of the Tate Modern in London from October 2003 to March 2004. For the project, Eliasson transformed the hall into an artificial natural phenomenon: at the far end of the hall, a semi-circular frame, fifty feet in diameter adorned by two hundred yellow sodium lights hung ninety feet from the floor and a projection screen was stretched across a second frame that was superimposed on the first frame creating a diffused yellow glow. Eliasson lined the ceiling of the hall with three hundred mirror panels covering thirty two thousand square feet. The semi circle combined with the mirrors created the effect of a circle of yellow light.\(^i\) Furthermore, artificial mist was pumped from sixteen nozzles scattered throughout the hall. The mechanisms of all these effects were clearly visible from various locations in the hall.

Weather is an important theme in Eliasson’s studio practice. The artist has explained that he views the weather forecast as the frontier of “now and here” due to the fact that the weather forecast forcibly brings the future “back to be included in our cultivated sense of the here and now.”\(^{ii}\) Eliasson therefore sees contemporary weather forecasts, with their use of meteorological tools and television as representations of society’s orientation in time and space. The artist has spoken about his conception of time in which only the “now” exists. The individual’s experience of time and space is central to the conception of The Weather Project.

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This paper seeks to demonstrate that *The Weather Project* utilizes the space of the museum to redefine the temporal orientation of the individual viewer. An analysis of *The Weather Project*’s setting reveals that the Turbine Hall becomes as much an element of the artwork as it is the space in which the artwork is projected. The project engenders a form of community that will be considered in terms of how it was formally achieved and how a sense of community affected the viewer’s orientation within the project. Finally, examining the concept of second-personhood will reveal how *The Weather Project* achieved an awareness of the collective through the viewer’s self-identification within the exhibit.

**Turbine Hall**

The Turbine Hall is considered to be the architectural centerpiece of the Tate Modern.iii The *Weather Project* was commissioned specifically for the Tate Modern as part of the Unilever Series. The architects of the museum, Jacques Herzog and Pierre de Meuron, describe the Turbine Hall as an intermediary point between the inside and outside world, claiming that their inspiration for the Hall arose from the nineteenth century arcade of the Galleria Vittorio Emanuele in Milan.iv The concept of a nineteenth century arcade as the inspiration for the design of the architectural renewal of the hall is a point worth emphasizing. In Walter Benjamin’s *Arcades Project* he notes a description of arcades from the *Illustrated Guide of Paris* of 1852:

> These arcades, a recent invention of industrial luxury, are glass-roofed, marble-paneled corridors extending through whole blocks of buildings, whose owners have joined together for such enterprises. Lining both sides of these corridors, which get their light from above, are the most elegant shops, so that the arcade is a city, a world in miniature (flâneur) in which customers will find everything they need. During sudden rain showers, the arcades are a place of refuge for the unprepared, to whom they offer a secure, if restricted, promenade—one from which the merchants also benefit.v

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iv Ibid.
Eliasson chose to design a weather phenomenon within a space that seeks to replicate an arcade. Ironically, the arcade’s original purpose was to separate people from the weather. In choosing to create a weather phenomenon in a space originally designed to protect people from the weather, the utility of the space itself is exposed. In other words, the Turbine Hall becomes part of The Weather Project. I argue that by inverting the arcade’s purpose, Eliasson is attempting to showcase issues concerning the spectators’ attention that, directly or indirectly, have their antecedents in Benjamin’s observations that specific spaces shaped the public’s experience of modernity and capitalism.

Traditionally, the museum institution represents a milieu that conserves objects from a variety of time periods. Museums have been known to be institutions that establish historical and temporal frameworks through their arrangement and display of objects selected from their collection. Unlike the artworks that have been exhibited in Eliasson’s most recent show: Take Your Time, the exhibition of The Weather Project lasted only a few months and can now only be seen in photographs or videos. The museum space becomes an element of the artwork because of the temporary nature of The Weather Project. The meaning of the artwork is only truly understood in relation to its exhibition within the Turbine Hall. The space is used to emphasize the ‘Now,’ immersing the viewer both spatially and temporally within a specific sense of the present.

The Weather Project also utilizes the museum hall to bring forth wonder: the borderline between sensation and thought. In Madeleine Grynsztejn’s article: “(Y)our Entanglements: Olafur Eliasson, The Museum, and Consumer Culture,” Grynsztejn makes a compelling comparison between Eliasson’s artwork and the eighteenth century “Wunderkammer” or

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“curiosity cabinet.” In a certain way, the “Wunderkammer” can be understood as the predecessor of the museum. The locale consisted of a collection of objects from a variety of categories. The aim of the collection was to elicit delight through the object’s rare form, beauty, or strangeness and to simultaneously reveal its mechanical or scientific function. Therefore, the milieu created both an address to the senses and the intellect, much in the same way that The Weather Project elicited the viewer’s senses and at the same time revealed how the project mechanically functioned.

In order to relate the concept of wonder back to the subject of time, it is useful to consider Jean-Luc Nancy’s explanation of wonder. In the text: “The Surprise of the Event” Nancy claims wonder to be at the source of the explanation of how thinking can be surprised. Nancy also writes:

> Wonder, then, does not appear as some ignorance to be overcome or as an aporia to be surmounted, which would be a situation wherein one science could not really be distinguished from the others; instead, wonder appears as a disposition toward Sophia for its own sake.

After characterizing wonder in this way, Nancy goes on to point out that the element of wonder “could never properly be made into an ‘element’ but is instead an event.” Wonder comes to be not only an elicitation of the senses and the intellect, but also the very basis of the characteristic of time that is the surprise of the event. Thus, the Turbine Hall is utilized to highlight an awareness of the meeting between the concept of time and the concept of space through the elicitation of wonder. The space of the Turbine Hall is fused into the artwork as it provokes an awareness of the individual’s immersion within a specific temporal and spatial environment.

**The Individual and the Whole**

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ix Ibid.
Photographs of *The Weather Project* reveal the various ways that individuals responded to the artwork. The public gathering of people at the exhibition engenders a form of community that is incorporated into the subject matter of *The Weather Project*. Jean Luc Nancy’s notion of thinking about community in relation to singular human beings can be productively applied to *The Weather Project*. The space of the Turbine Hall as well as the effect of the mirror-paneled ceiling made it an inevitably communal experience. Madeleine Grynsztejn has written on the subject:

> Sharing our singular impressions in this way, we come into a ‘being-in-common’ or ‘being-with,’ as opposed to a ‘being-in-solitude’ into a community of sorts, a loose and differentiated collectivity of individuals defined not by common interest or essential feature but simply by a copresence in a ‘constructed situation’ designed (in part) to generate provisional but compelling social bonds.\(^x\)

*The Weather Project* therefore took on the interesting role of bringing together a group of social beings and simultaneously put into question what united the group together. The advertisement campaign that Eliasson designed for the exhibit questioned the element of socialization implicit in the topic of the weather. For example, one advertisement stated: “Does Talking about the Weather Lead to Friendship?” *The Weather Project* thus brought together a group of people within an environment to focus on their own individual perception while making them realize the unifying social aspect that is produced by the experience of the weather.

Assuming vocal communication was not achieved between the viewers, photographs of the exhibit reveal how mere observation of *The Weather Project* brought people into close proximity. With mirrors covering the entire ceiling and the light emanating from the “sun” illuminating the hall, there existed no designated or single fixed point of observation. Rather, observation was possible from all points of the micro-community within the Turbine Hall. Visitors sprawled on the floor, some united to form grand shapes and symbols, while others lay

\(^x\) Madeleine Grynsztejn, “(Y)our Entanglements: Olafur Eliasson, the Museum, and Consumer Culture,” 19.
down as if they were sunbathing on a beach, children running about excitedly. In order to approach Eliasson’s sun, one had to carefully chart a course through a range of watching observers.

This form of behavior demonstrates a divergence from the modern development of visual relations that has been shown to promote individual spectatorship. For example, in his article “Géricault, the Panorama and Sites of Reality in the Early Nineteenth Century,” Jonathan Crary uses William Hogarth’s engraving Southwark Fair to demonstrate that the spectators of the peepshow move from minor subjects in the eighteenth century to being dominant subjects of visual culture in the nineteenth century. Crary uses the spectator of the peep show to exemplify a new isolated viewer that becomes separated from a milieu of distraction and sublimates the possibility for carnival. Hogarth’s image exemplifies the isolated viewer since it demonstrates the contrast between the carnivalesque atmosphere of the fair and the two seated immobile and absorbed individuals looking at the double-sided peep-show. Within The Weather Project, the omnipresence of the artwork itself incorporates others as part of the individual act of perception. In other words, when viewing the artwork, it was inevitable to witness others also in the act of looking. Thus, Eliasson utilized the space of the Turbine Hall to redefine the decorum of the social network of the museum space, to bring back the element of carnival that is present in Hogarth’s engraving. In summary, Eliasson utilized the large scale of the Hall in order to force the viewer to question his individual relationship with the community of visitors within the museum, while at the same time he contemplated the artwork.

Second-Personhood

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“Second-personhood” is at the heart of Eliasson’s work, and demonstrates how his artwork achieves an understanding of the collective through self-identification within space.

Mieke Bal defines second-personhood as the following:

Eliasson tends to eschew the frontality of the purely visual for the ambient and indeterminate effects of the total-surround environment as experienced by some ‘you.’ This some ‘you’ is indeterminate by definition, and that is why this form of address is so important. The position of ‘you’ is interchangeable and constantly changing. It is also the position from which any “I” must be recognized and validated: without “you” no “I” is possible. But the “you” does not need to be a person.\textsuperscript{xii}

This is how Eliasson succeeds in creating an artwork that advocates an individual’s unique experience of the artwork and simultaneously a communal experience of the project. By shifting from the third person grammar of perspective to the second, the viewer is given the capacity to experience independently, but is made conscious that one experience is impossible without the other.

An explanation of Mikhail Bakhtin’s term “chronotope” clarifies this concept. Mieke Bal summarizes the term:

Bakhtin used this word to foreground the indissoluble bond between time and space, the two dimensions in which, at any given moment, (real or fictional) subjects are located. In his most succinct wording, chronotope refers to the ‘intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed.’\textsuperscript{xiii}

The peepshow, referred to earlier, exemplifies a denial of one’s chronotope because the viewer of the show is negating their surroundings to focus solely upon the show. The viewer is still located in time and space, but such a form of directed attention denies the individual the capacity to be conscious of his location. No two people share the same chronotope. Chronotopes are the coordinates of time and space that determine one’s positioning at any point within one’s life. Bal equates the chronotope with strings: “You don’t notice it, but the strings are there; they act, inscribe your presence, and register it in an encounter between your sense perceptions and the


\textsuperscript{xiii} Ibid.
world.”xiv People generally go about their lives without paying much attention to their relation to time and space. The Weather Project uses space to question the chronotope type habits possessed by the viewer: “[t]he viewer must surrender her baggage of visual knowledge in order to see what is here now-and on that basis only, experience time.”xv Eliasson utilized a space that was traditionally assumed to be a space of encounter with other objects. Yet, by staging a grandiose natural phenomenon and simultaneously revealing the mechanics of the work, Eliasson devised a sphere of discovery of one’s own current perception and a discovery of the reactions of others. Eliasson’s installation did not advocate a reflection on what has occurred in the past; rather it advocated a reflection upon what was occurring within the Turbine Hall at that very moment.

Conclusion

This paper has sought to demonstrate that The Weather Project immersed the individual within a unique representation of the reality of the present that could only be fully realized by the individual viewer. The Weather Project demonstrates a use of museum space that architecturally, socially, and individually creates a heightened awareness of an individual’s present placement within space and time. Eliasson used the space of the Tate Modern to house his art project and simultaneously incorporated the space into the viewer’s “object” of examination. Thus, The Weather Project uses the representation of a natural phenomenon in the space of the museum in order to enable the viewer to experience his/her own sense of time and space within the present moment.

xiv Ibid.
xv Ibid, 170.
Bibliography


