

Olafur Eliasson

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# BEYOND THE AMBIENT

Who exactly is the “you” so often invoked in the titles of Olafur Eliasson’s ephemeral, ambient works? Recurrent features since the beginning of his career in the first half of the nineties, these “you”s—as in *YOUR STRANGE CERTAINTY STILL KEPT* (1996) or *YOUR INTUITIVE SURROUNDINGS VERSUS YOUR SURROUNDED INTUITION* (2000)—at times sound a bit as if voiced by an über-producer controlling not only the creation of a set of conditions for viewing or perceiving, but also the particular effects those conditions will have on those who happen to be subjected to them. In fact, the range of control-factors is rather wide: The titles indicate not only the types of emotion that will be evoked, or the type of positioning that will take place, but sometimes even transformations the “you” is likely to undergo.

Initially, of course, the series of “you”s just seems to evoke some generalized spectator who is from the outset implicated in the works themselves. At least this seems like the obvious conclusion, given the type of work produced by Eliasson and the wider history

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of this mode of working. The term “surrounding” is key here since Eliasson could generally be said to adhere to a by now widespread tendency to eschew the frontality of the purely visual for the ambient and indeterminate effects of the total-surround environment as experienced by some “you”—a type of work which actually calls for a participant rather than a spectator, someone immersed in the now of a situation rather than focused on a pre-produced scene. Yet this doesn’t quite add up. For what such immersive situations require is precisely that the relation to the “you” or the participant is left unspecified or open. Once it is determined in too specific terms, the danger is that the participant becomes just a prop in a set, an element within a designed whole, perspectivized or surveyed as another intentional identity. Immersion involves the subjectivity of the participant from the wholly different perspective of its virtuality. Submerged in the too-dense or infinitely multifaceted information-flow of a total environment, a kind of surround sense or spherical thinking is required, which again implies a hypothetical state of semi-disembodiment, a self removed from itself. Actually, productive frameworks for such



openness or indeterminacy are surprisingly hard to come by given the amount of artwork which seems to swear by it as an ideal. But more surprising still is this apparently quite explicit attempt at closure in a series of work—Eliasson’s—which otherwise delves into the ambient with a rare kind of obstinacy and sense of consequence. It is as if this sequence of titles, seen together, somehow manages to cast an ambivalent light on the recent history of ambient art and its general ideal of constituting a front against spectacular culture. It is, in short, almost as if the ambient itself could shrink to an image at the sound of Eliasson’s chilly distinction between “your” and “mine.”

In all its simplicity, the installation in the Hall of Mirrors at the Neue Galerie in Graz in 1996 would seem to have been at once the fulfillment and the futuristic renewal of the promises of the ambient ideal. Here was a specific site, an elegant rococo hall of mirrors replete with prism-laden chandeliers and the requisite stucco shell forms and plant motifs, seamlessly merged with a purely illusory environment, an underwater ambience produced by letting a strong light beam hit a convex mirror so as to send undulating wave movements around the room. Both the water illusion and the rococo mirrored hall evoke different types of immersive states based on an idea of the natural environment: the water because of its all-enveloping formless immensity and the mirrored hall for its striving to enclose the visitor within a superbly quasi-naturalistic ambience that produces endlessly refracted crystalline vistas and amorphous



plant forms with every turn of the head. But of course the notion of the natural environment was hardly substantiated here. Superimposed on many different levels at once, the usual perspectives on both nature and technology seemed to continually double up, each feeding off the other’s effective illusions. The result was concrete yet dreamy, tactile yet evanescent, artificial yet obviously and unquestionably “alive.” In fact, what you got was a very tangible sense of the workings of a virtual environment. For in this case the natural could hardly be experienced as the given, if uncontrollable, forms of an organic environment. And, similarly, the illusion of the independence of the technological as simply a type of application set in motion by some more or less mysterious outside force would appear as just that—an illusion. Instead, the room seemed to involve you in what Gilles Deleuze called “machinic thinking”: the technological operation through which the world continually produces itself as an event, in a process of concretization, individuation, and differentiation.

Still, the ambient in Eliasson’s works seems curiously suspended across several registers at once. And at times it does really seem to shrink to the size of an image. If one register in his work promotes a machinic thinking, which continually dislocates the sense of surroundings and the site-specific in a more



OLAFUR ELIASSON, *DOUBLE SUNSET*, 1999, giant yellow metal sun on a tower block in Utrecht, Netherlands, 41½ yd. diameter / *DOPPELTER SONNENUNTERGANG*, riesige gelbe Metallsonne an einem Gebäudeturm in Utrecht, 38 m Durchmesser.

restricted sense, another register seems vested in a kind of poster-pretty identity politics springing from a continual projection of the features of one particular natural environment and its place in the biography of the artist. Nature, in the work of Eliasson, is hardly without identity: it is, on the contrary, mired in the image of his native Iceland, its fog, moss, steam, ice, and flowing waters scattered around the world as so many emblems of a marginal piece of wilderness we take to be both personal and exotic. Here, apparently, are the memory-filled “now”s of that “I,” presented as quintessentially ambient phenomena for all those “you”s, all those other people who have the perception of their immediate surroundings momentarily altered thanks to them. No wonder they may then also take on all the fascination of colorful projections of some elsewhere. Think, for instance, of the blunt presentation of ice-blocks in the tropics. Think of the equally blunt frontality of the large moss pieces inside museums—playing up some kind of Icelandic-style flatness and boundlessness at the place ordinarily reserved for Barnett Newman. Or think, above all, of the magnificently luminous fog display seen at night in a huge glass box that covered the outside wall of the Kunstverein in Hamburg. The fact that the continually moving fog inside the box might make you pause for a moment to take note of the unpredictability of the atmospheric conditions both inside and outside of the glass partition—to note, more precisely, your city habit of generally ignoring such phenomena unless they happen to interfere with your personal appearance—did not stop the work from also just lining itself up along with all of the other great flickering signs and images that light up cities at night. No pious devotion to the “specificity” of context here. No attempt to “counteract” the enduring problem of our representational thought habits: that almost every single piece of information commonly agreed upon as a fact of nature is already reified as an image without history. As demonstrated by *DOUBLE SUNSET* (1999), even the setting sun could be exchanged for a flat billboard. Different media, but same spectacle—particularly when seen from a proper distance, preferably from a car speeding by as if arriving just in time to catch the colossal semicircular disc of

the sun slipping behind trees lining the highway. Momentarily that sun will be gone without a trace, consumed, like so many other images, on the way to somewhere else. T. J. Clark has described the impressionist’s obsession with sunrises and sunsets—what Felix Fénéon called “making nature grimace”—as an obsession with capturing, as painting, precisely that moment when everything momentarily changes shape, that is, when the essential picture of nature itself is interrupted.<sup>1)</sup> With *DOUBLE SUNSET*, however, there are no grimaces, no interruptions, only what Guy Debord would probably have called a “pseudo-event.” The sun-board, as obstinately fixed and frontal as the billboard smiles that are still with us after all these years of supposedly increasingly subtly coded advertising, will of course hang on for an endless series of ever new encounters, come rain or come shine.

The two tendencies in Eliasson’s ambient works can’t really be reconciled. But then again there is no reason why they should be. In the art practices of the last decades there has been a proliferation of strategies that all, in different ways, pit the ambient and the visualist against one another on each side of a divide that separates (bad) spectacularity from (good) forms of subversion or escape. But this groping for some imagined outside to the spectacular might also be symptomatic of a form of naivete (or a disposition for moralizing) to which Eliasson’s works, for all their evident niceness, are not particularly prone. The division, or duplicity, within his own practice is in many ways its salient point. During the last decade the ambient has often been figured as a dwelling-place, a womb-like social idyll whose design-strategies approximately model the natural environment, a bit à la Baudelaire’s “forests of signs.” By refusing this kind of unity, Eliasson’s work recaptures an alternative, and more impatient, type of production which continually encircles and probes the sense of place itself—including some of the ideal places art occasionally manages to create for itself.

1) T. J. Clark, *Farewell to an Idea. Episodes from a History of Modernism* (London and New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), p. 112.

