OLAFUR ELIASSON
YOUR INTUITIVE SURROUNDINGS
FOCUS FROM EXPERIMENTAL ARCHITECTURE

THE ART INSTITUTE OF CHICAGO
16 MAY–13 AUGUST 2005
The focus exhibition marks the debut of two new works by Eliasson designed specifically for The Art Institute of Chicago. The artist has engineered a changing light installation in an otherwise empty space (Gallery 271). The piece—originally titled Your intuitive surrounding versus your surround—intuitive—is comprised of 130 white fluorescent tubes supported by a grid suspended from the gallery’s glass skylight (eighteen feet high). A translucent, white scintillating cloud extends across the entire width (twenty-six feet) and approximately one-half the length (twenty-six feet) of the gallery. With the overhead skylights closed and the lighting apparatuses clearly visible, the space is flooded with artificial fluorescent sunlight. All of the specially selected fixtures are regulated by computer-controlled dimmers, which produce slowly changing light levels and varying degrees of intensity. The movement of the cloudy installation and altered the patterns of light and shadow create an intimate relationship with the natural scene.
By isolating an effect that mirrors a natural phenomenon within the context of a space devoted to art and aesthetics, Elisson focuses and intensifies the sensory aspects of the experience. "Nature" is deployed here not as an end in itself but as a means to investigate individual subjectivity. The real subject of Elisson's work is ultimately the skills of perception that reside within each viewer. The poetica of the work's title, along with the artist's now signature use of a second-person possessive pronoun, points to the centrality of the individual viewer in Elisson's conception of his project. Your immediate surroundings versus your surrounded situation: the former refers to the environment, the latter to the viewer within the environment. In the logic of this challenging wordplay, the surroundings are surrounded and the surrounded is placed in his or her surround, just as the viewer is faced once the subject and the object of the work.

In conjunction with the light installation, Elisson has also created an outdoor structure for the Art Institute that both surrounds and is surrounded by the museum: it is located outside one of the museum's buildings but contained on three sides by several others. The Art Institute of Chicago—unlike any other art institution of its size in the U.S.—spans an active railway line. To accommodate the trains and the necessary technical equipment to maintain and operate the tracks, the museum's physical plant incorporates a large, undeveloped open area between three of its largest wings. Traversed by Gunsalus Hall (1927), the area lies between the Morton Wing (1963) and the Daniel F. and Ada L. Rice Building (1988). Elisson's intervention, titled Surrenda (2006), is located in this rarely used service area, visible through the floor-to-ceiling glass windows in the Rice Building Loggia (Gallery 254). The artist has constructed a shallow, rectangular tray (approximately twenty by twenty feet) filled with soil and grass that is supported by a tower of scaffolding (some thirty feet high). Positioned directly alongside the windows, the work appears to be...
Olafur Eliasson is of Icelandic descent but was born and raised in Denmark (Copenhagen, 1967). He spent a significant portion of his childhood and adolescence with family in Iceland. Since the artist first achieved international prominence in the mid-1990s, a great deal of critical attention has been paid to his Nordic roots. Indeed, much of the work has been read in relation to the landscape and geography of a place that is often referred to—somewhat mistakenly—as “his native Iceland.” Eliasson stated: “When I lived in Denmark, my Scandinavian identity was never an issue for me. When I left Scandinavia for Germany in 1993, I realized for the first time that the place you come from makes a difference...it did make me aware that my interests, at least historically, could be traced to the Scandinavian tradition.” Although Eliasson has been quick...
to acknowledge his relationship to a Nordic visual art tradition, the repeated emphasis on his national identity—particularly in regard to the exotic appeal of Iceland's dramatic, isolated landscape—has begun to overdetermine other critical readings of the artist's work.

Says Eliasson: "The importance of my national identity has always been dramatically exaggerated by critics and art historians who tend to use it as a short cut for interpretations of my work. Basically, I consider myself Scandinavian or northern European. I don't mind talking about it since it's no secret where I am from. I can say, however, that there is nothing mystical about coming from Iceland. My family comes out of a long tradition of commercial fishing, and believe me there is absolutely nothing magical about the commercial fishing industry. My father works on the ocean and although I have made works with him (such as the photos of waves on this page), I haven't used the opportunity to show or talk about the romantic and harsh life on an industrial fishing boat, since I believe that it is not relevant to my work."

Eliasson's formal concerns can be just as readily linked to the history of art as they can to the geography of his childhood. Of particular influence for Eliasson are American artists such as Robert Irwin (born 1928), Mark Grotjens (born 1943), and, to a lesser extent, James Turrell (born 1943). Irwin, Turrell, and Nordman are three of the most prominent individuals among a group of loosely affiliated artists who emerged in southern California in the late 1960s with installation-based work that explored issues of light and space. Irwin's archetypal installations with translucent scrim and Nordman's pioneering experiments with direct and reflected sunlight are of special relevance to Eliasson, although he had positive exposure to these works as a student.

Many of his "light and space" predecessors, Turrell in particular, were interested in using light to achieve a sense of triumph in minimalism. Not sure of what they are talking or
not seeing; viewers of a Turrell light installation, for example, are intentionally confronted and confused by spatial ambiguity, optical illusions, and sometimes even total darkness. Ellsworth's works, in sharp contrast, are simple, direct, and immediately comprehensible. They are assembled from readily available components and the artist makes no attempt to conceal the apparatus producing the effect. The rudimentary technology—buses, electric lights, extensions cords, water pumps, scaffolding, or whatever is required to make the piece—is always immediately visible upon entering Ellsworth's spaces. There are no secrets, no trickery—only spatial situations designed, as the artist says, to "crystallize ourselves sensing."

JAMES RONBAUER
ASSOCIATE CURATOR OF CONTEMPORARY ART
DEPARTMENT OF MODERN AND CONTEMPORARY ART

NOTES

Unless otherwise noted, all quotes from Olafur Eliasson are taken from correspondence and conversation with the author, April 2000.


4. "In its relationship to the architecture of the exhibition space, this work relates to The very large ice flow (1996, 2000) San Paolo Bianco, a raised rectangular floor of ice that spirally extends through a glass wall to the exterior of the building, as well as to Your natural decimation reversed (1995, Carrara International), a similar piece using water and steam."

OLAFUR ELIASSON

Icelandic, born Copenhagen, Denmark, 1967

Studied at the Royal Academy of Arts, Copenhagen, 1989-95

Lives and works in Berlin, Germany

SELECTED AND PERSON
EXHIBITIONS

1990
Copenhagen, Overgarden Galleri

1992
Cologne, Lukas & Hofmann,
Some people remember
walking that night

Copenhagen, Stadie Out of
Spices, Number 54

Malmö (Sweden), Forum

galleriet, No days in winter,
no nights in summer

1996
Berlin, neuer)',enschneider,
A description of a reflection, or
a pleasant exercise regarding
its qualities

Hamburg, Kunsthalle, Thoko

Odense (Denmark), Tommy

Eful Gallerie

Stuttgart, Künstlerhaus

1997
Malmö (Sweden), Konstmuseum

Milan, Galleria Eni Fontana,
Your foresight endured

New York, Tonya Bonakdar

Gallery, Your strange
continents still fly

Stockholm, Galeri Andreas

Brändström, Tell me about
a miraculous invention

1998
São Paulo, Pinacoteca de

São Paulo, The mirrors perch

Copenhagen, Stadie Out of
Spices, Number 58

Los Angeles, Marc Foxx Gallery,
Your Sunmachine

1998
Arhus (Denmark), Arhus

Kunstmuseum, Tell me about
a miraculous invention

Berlin, neuer)',enschneider

Kiel (Germany), Galerie Fringe

Wannenberger Aquarium

Leipzig, Galerie für
Zeitgenössische Kunst

New York, Bonakdar Jancou

Gallery, The inventive velocity
versus your inverted value

Reykjavik (Iceland),

Kjarvalstadir Museum

Umeå (Sweden), Bildmuseet,

Photoworks

Zurich, Galerie Peter Kobrann

1999
Amsterdam, De Apoll

Foundation (with Job Koster, Jr.)
Dundee (Scotland), Dundee Contemporary Arts. Your position surrounded and your surroundings positioned
Frankfurt, Kunsthalle
Your double day diary.
Los Angeles, Mira Faye Gallery. Beauty
Milan, Galleria L'Esperanta, Exeter University. Impression
Ray, Kansas, Detroit
Galleria Hopohystrani
Torino (Italy)
Castello di Rivoli
Wolfsburg (Germany), Kunstverein Wolfsburg
2005
Dublin, Irish Museum of Modern Art. The outdoor garden
Graz (Austria), Neue Galerie. Surroundings surrounded by Beauty
Kristiansand, CCA, The only thing we have in common is that we are different

Ridgefield, CT, Aldrich Museum of Contemporary Art. New Work
Tokyo, Gallery Koyanagi. Your orange afterimage exposed
Tokyo, Masataka Hayakawa Gallery. Youthblue afterimage exposed

EXHIBITION GROUP EXHIBITIONS
1990
Copenhagen, Charlottenborg Kunsthall. Westside Projects
1992
Copenhagen, BIZART (Billboard Projects). Street Signs
1994
Copenhagen, Stadka Out of Space. Young Scandinavia Art
1996
Copenhagen, Creative
Copenhagen, Billboard Projects. Paradise Europe
1998
Copenhagen, Stadka Out of Space. 7100 CET

Copenhagen, GLOBE Kuratorgruppe, Black Box
1996
Munch, Ausstellung Munchner Galerien, Europa

COPENHAGEN, Denmark, Congo 95
1996
Graz (Austria), Neue Galerie. Turku (Finland), Weinh Aaltonen Museum of Art; and Tel Aviv, Aradco, Rotella Cabelllosino
Oslo (Norway), Kunst og Kultur, The Museum, Modern Art, The
1995-96
New York, Tony's Botanical Gallery. Summer Show
Raykheuk (Ireland), Kongelige Stadie Museum. Views of Norway, Norway
Rotterdam, the Netherlands. Manifesta II. First European Biennial of Contemporary Art
San Francisco, New Langton Arts. Glow: Sublime Projected an Reflected Light
1987
Amos (Canada), Third Symposium on Visual Arts LANDART
Geneva, Centre genevois de gravure contemporaine, Eté 97
Istanbul, On Life, Beauty, Translation and Other Difficulties: Fifth International Istanbul Biennal
Johannesburg, Second Johannesburg Biennial
Trade Routes History and Geography
Louisiane (Denmark), Louisiana Museum, New Scandinavian Art
Santa Fe, SITE Santa Fe, Traces: Echoes of Art in an Age of Endless Conclusions

1986
Amsterdam, De Appel Foundation, Seamless
Bremen (Germany), Internationales Do All Deener Never Walls?

Cologne, Kunsthalle Cologne, Mai '90
Kassel, Fridericianum, Something Is Rotten in the State of Denmark
Las Palmas (Canary Islands), Centro Atlantico de Arte Moderno, Transatlantic
London, Institute of Contemporary Art, Sightings: New Photographic Art
Madrid, Museo de Arte Contemporaneo, Interferencias
Malmö (Sweden), Roosevelt Center for Contemporary Art, The Edelman Foundation Art Prize 1995
Moos (Norway), Fakkus: Momentum, Nordic Festival of Contemporary Art
New York, The Jewish Museum, Light & Light: The Hanukkah Project
New York, Museum of Modern Art, New Photography '94

Paris, Musée d'art moderne de la Ville de Paris, Nuit blanche, La Jeune Scène nordique
São Paulo (Brazil), XXV Bienal de São Paulo
Sydney, 11th Biennale of Sydney
Vilnius (Lithuania), Contemporary Art Center, The Seventh Triennial of Contemporary Art, Cool Places
Zürich, Kunsthalle Zürich, Auf der Spur

1996
Cambridge, MA, MIT Live Visual Art Center, Landscape: Outside the Frame
Frankfurt, Frankfurter Kunstverein, To the People of the City of the Euro
Leodden (Norway), The Midnight Sun Show
New York, Bonakdar Jancou
Gallery, Drawings

New York, Solomon R.
Guggenheim Museum,
Photography: An Expanded
View, Recent Acquisitions
Utrecht (The Netherlands),
Centraal Museum, Panorama
2000

Venice, dAPERTutto
La Biennale di Venezia, 48a
Esposizione internazionale
d'arte

Wolfsburg (Germany),
Kunstmuseum Wolfsburg,
German Open

MINDFUL WITNESSEES
Art at the Turn of the
Millennium. Edited by Burkhard
Riemenschneider and Ute

Birdaum, Daniel. "Openings:
Olafur Eliasson." Artforum 38.8

Bonami, Francesco. "Olafur
Eliasson." Cream: Contemporary
Art in Culture: 10 Curators, 10
Writers, 100 Artists. London,

"Olafur Eliasson." Flash
Art 188 (May/June 1998),
pp. 105.

"Psychological
Atmospheres." Skira. The
Nordic Art Review 12, 3
(Autumn 1997), Pp. 49-55.

"Truce: Visions Beyond
the Abyss." Stone Figurines of Art
in an Age of Endless Constructions.
Exh. cat. STF Santa Fe, Santa Fe,

Crary, Jonathan. "Olafur
Eliasson: Visionary Events.
Olafur Eliasson, exh. cat.

Glueck, Gracia. "New
Photography 14." The New York

Grynsztejn, Madeleine.
Carnegie International/
Museum of Art, Pittsburgh,

Hayes, Christian. "The Iceman
Cometh." Frieze 49 (May 1998),

Jones, Karen. "The Ontology of
Immateriality: The Works of
Olafur Eliasson." Zeitschrift.
Exh. cat. De Appel Foundation,
Amsterdam, 1998.

L'Armidin, Once Lost:
Five Views on Nordic Art Now.
Edited by Daniel Birnbaum and
Julie Peter Nilsson. Malmo,

Metzel, Tobias. "Olafur

New Art. Edited by Besana
Maroong, Diana Murphy, and Eva

Ross, Hans Rudolf. "Olafur
Eliasson." Artforum 35
(Summer 1997), p. 146.

EXHIBITIONS
Succession 12001
Grass, soil, scaffolding
Your Intuitive Surroundings versus Your Surrounded Intuition (2000)
Florescent light tubes, dimmer, projection foil

GALLERY TALKS
Wednesday, May 1, 5:00 p.m.
Olafur Eliasson and critic Daniel Birnbaum
Friday, May 12 12:00 p.m.
Stephanie Skistos
Wednesday, June 23 12:00 p.m.
James Bondello
Wednesday, August 8 12:00 p.m.
Celia Marriott

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