

## THE REENCHANTMENT OF THE INTERIOR

# OLAFUR ELIASSON'S WEATHER PROJECT

By Sanford Kwinter

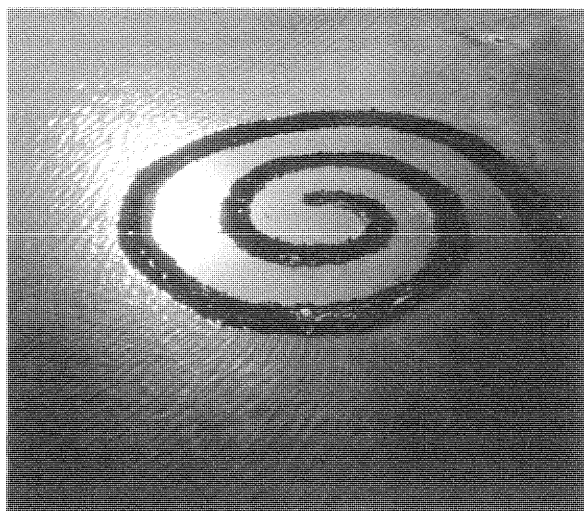
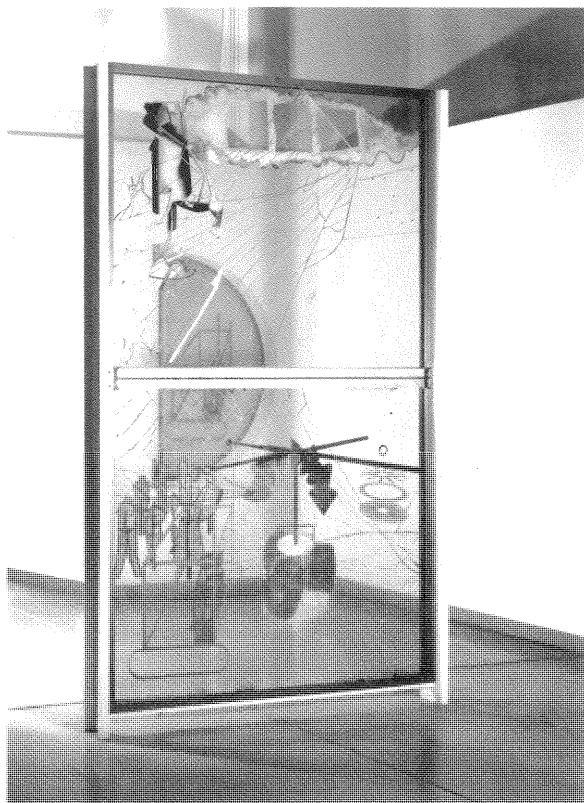
Olafur Eliasson's *Weather Project* of 2003 was among the most widely covered and freely engaged art works of recent times.<sup>1</sup> The work's immense artificial sun, orbit-locked four-fifths of the way from the top of the *Tate Modern's* grand but long-derelicted electrical turbine hall, generated steadily and genially for months its own set of forces and energies, brazenly *ex machina*, to produce an interior cosmos—and cosmogony—all its own. The *Tate* installation may be compared with Marcel Duchamp's *Large Glass* for its shared metaphysical preoccupation with the ancient principal of *emanation* (the desire that flows from the Bride/Cloud above to the Bachelors/Machines below, and vice versa), for its "impressionist" or centrifugal domination of the ambient or exhibition space outside and around it,<sup>2</sup> as well as for the astonishing plethora of interpretive effort that has been directed at it and for the resistance it has shown to such exegesis. Yet *The Weather Project* was largely engaged with and adored, even by intellectuals and despite its almost populist tenor, and lauded as a watershed, albeit one that has somehow eluded convincing explanation.

*The Weather Project*, however, can also be compared to *The Spiral Jetty*, the seminal land artwork of Robert Smithson—it possesses a different gravity to be sure, but it was realized in a very different historical time—which identically places an image of the burning sun at the center of its geometrically and technologically organized cosmos. It was of capital importance for Smithson to work the sun into the focus of *The Spiral Jetty's* vortex, thereby to connect the combustion of stars to the slow burn of entropy at vaster temporal (and

experiential) scales and to connect the topological trope of the movie reel to the neurobiology of the brain, each capturing reality like an oscillating and spiroform consciousness. A work like Eliasson's *Weather Project* bridges the cosmologies of the object-unit (Duchamp's *Large Glass* as a piece of equipment operating in situ) to the infinities of geological and astronomical continuums (the *Jetty's* engagement of mineral time as the ultimate container of all other things) by working through the lost "middle realm" that can also be called "the interior." Eliasson's *Weather Project* declares for middleness and for the interior a substantiality that can only be called an anima.

The Ancients obsessed on the question of how and where to place the unity of the One in relation to the marvelous Many of the sensible, apparent world. With the arrival of monotheism, Greek physical doctrine became subordinated to the demands of divine participation in worldly space: How is it that the divine may act in and on the world unless it is somehow connected to it (even while remaining largely transcendent)? Emanationism—particularly in the neo-Platonist cosmologies of Proclus and Plotinus—was developed to explain how the world of created things flowed from God as a light emanates from a sun, penetrates, conquers, and is itself progressively diminished by the darkness it enters. The Jesus principle—specifically his "humanation"—is simply an emanation from God, one that in turn rises back up the chain of being to be incorporated back into Him. In all emanationist philosophies, the origin remains undiminished in its brightness and purity; the difference





arises in that in some philosophies the origin remains distinct from what it creates, while in others it is ontologically continuous with the reality and matter that emanates from it. The latter viewpoint is the foundation of Pantheism and a recurrent element in contemporary thought and aesthetics.

We are all acquainted with the founding myth of the metaphysics of light as dramatized in Plato's *Republic*—the complex machinery of the cave wherein the antagonism between light and shadow produces a mere copy of a copy of reality, truth, etc. Is this scene, however, not the originary moment that marks the *demonization of the interior* in our culture, the moment of its disqualification as a site of bona fide social, political, or sensual experience (truth having been made to reside solely within the blinding light of the exterior sun, symbol of the eternal Idea and its freedom from substance)? *The Weather Project* at any rate can be said to have restaged the west's optical primal scene, only to different moral effect.

*The Weather Project* presents a tale of where the world came from, why it is here, and how we, particularly, have become present to it. Central to Eliasson's worldview is the principle that world and perceiver mutually engender one another and that cognition and sensation—knowing and seeing, for example—are not only intimately connected but are creative, not reproductive practices. Artist and perceiver—the one who organizes reality and the one who accepts being acted on by it—are implicated in each other's activity; both are bound to the world by the same indeterminacies, the same exile from fact, the same desperate but beautiful commitment to cobble a workable fiction from fragments of sensation. This is the posture into which every work of Eliasson seeks to place us: to “see ourselves sensing,” as he persistently states it, is to attend to how the world modifies us by virtue of the fact that we are there, and more important still, how we modify the world when we grasp it in our senses. The “world” neither pre-exists us nor do we exist separately and passively within it. We are not “in” the world but in fact *are* (part of) the world itself.

Eliasson's is a metabolic universe animated by performing machines, a universe knit together by

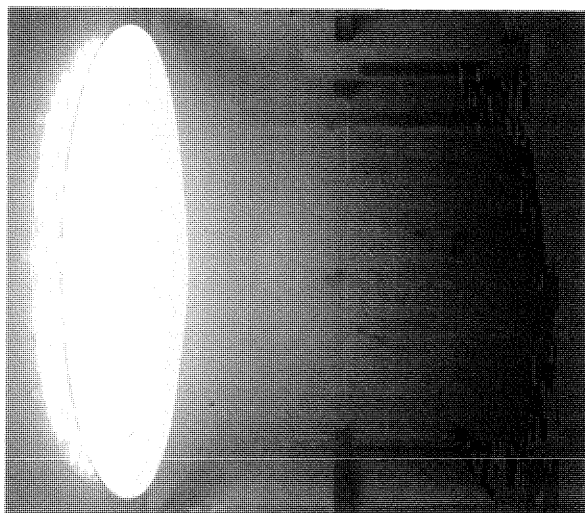




Page 70 Olafur Eliasson, *The Weather Project*, Turbine Hall, Tate Modern, London, 2003. © Eva-Lotta Jansson/Corbis Above Olafur Eliasson, *The Weather Project*, Turbine Hall, Tate Modern, London, 2003. Photo: Peter Marlow/Magnum Photos.

Opposite, top Marcel Duchamp, *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even*, aka *The Large Glass*, 1923. © Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/ADAGP, Paris/Succession Marcel Duchamp. Collection of the Philadelphia Museum of Art: Bequest of Katherine S. Dreier, 1952 Opposite, bottom Robert Smithson, *Spiral Jetty*, Rozel Point, Utah, 1970. © Estate of Robert Smithson. Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY. Courtesy James Cohan Gallery

waves, transactional loops, and the fluctuation of correlated variables that could only be called endless weather. In *The Weather Project*, the emanation is no longer that of the Platonists conceived primarily as a *descent* in which the reality from which the world emanates remains unchanged and eternally identical with itself. It is rather the differential flow of evolution — in other words, real time — that implies the ceaseless change of one thing into something else. Eliasson's universal weather is a continuous and varying glissando played out in both the ambient world and in the psyche (nervous system), a sliding scale of correlated values that continually modify and test the firmness of what is. Cloudy days bring the blues, but also modify every other color in the spectrum (blue shift), changing their essential meaning and function thereby. Eliasson's *Weather Project* — which goes well beyond the



eponymous work discussed here — has as its central concern to sound the foundations of this variability and firmness: Color is temperature, frequency oscillation, a wave that can be modified and that, in being modified, modifies us.

Eliasson's interior "sun" is itself a machine made up of hundreds of monofrequency light bulbs arrayed behind a scrim yet deliberately apparent to observation, a machine that, in conjunction with the psycho-neurological and electrochemical machinery of our nervous systems, effectively empties the environment of color (or rather, renders color unavailable for harvest by our senses because it changes the conditions of reception). By including a touch of atmospheric phlogiston—in the form of a periodic, mechanical emission of artificial cloud—the work intensifies the impression that what we have is a single propagative medium that begins with electrical feeds to the emanating light apparatus and then circuits through our own immensely labile perceptual machinery.

Just as light propagates through the room like watercolor into wetted paper, we too literally become space because we discover ourselves "out there" within the cybernetic loops that actively modify and produce it. Not only do we come to experience ourselves as perpetually adapting physiological machines with indeterminate boundaries — seeing ourselves sensing — we also discover our milieu as an active, responsive and living Nature, regardless of how artificial, or technologically saturated it might be.

In an earlier, related work, of 1997 entitled *Your Sun Machine* (1997), Eliasson cut a hole in the roof of a building to allow a beam of sunlight to enter and perambulate through a room in a daily cycle, to paint a slow geometry within it by tapping the orbital mechanics of celestial motion. This machine connects our own biomechanical movements to the music of the spheres within the controlled interface of the room. Similarly in the *Tate's Weather Project*, the vertical walls are liquidated entirely, as the horizon and azimuth are brought to the fore: Spectators lay prostrate on the activated floor, invert their physiological relation to gravity, and lose themselves in the infinite regress and redoubling of the boundless overhead mirror. The vertigo here is fully intentional and is ethical in nature: It teaches us that our bodies are infinitely plastic and can be released from any existing routine yet never from their transactional relation to the ambient world. Perhaps in no other recent work of art or architecture is the human investment in and continuity with its physical milieu so strongly placed into relief. The interior is shown to be both an interface with and a component of the wider cosmos. Our connection to it is our connection to a moving, changing, and unpredictable nature itself.

*The Weather Project* is a machine that sets other machines into relation with one another: a sun machine, an ambient or interior machine, and a sensing machine (us) without demystifying the instabilities, the fevers, and mysteries of an essentially open, living, and productive universe.

Above Olafur Eliasson, *The Weather Project*, detail, Turbine Hall, *Tate Modern*, London, 2003. © Olafur Eliasson. Photo: Jens Ziehe. Courtesy of the artist; neugierriemschneider, Berlin; Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York