

Brown, Katrina. "If the eye were not sun-like, the sun's light it would not see."  
In *Olafur Eliasson: Your position surrounded and your surroundings positioned*.  
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## 'If the eye were not sun-like, the sun's light it would not see.'<sup>1</sup> Katrina Brown

A simplistic explanation of how we relate to our natural surroundings might run as follows: As geographers have explored and charted the surface of the globe, the true wilderness has retreated in the face of cultivating forces. And as the possibility of 'dis-covering' uncharted land has all but disappeared, a romantic attachment to the remaining uninhabited, uncultivated areas of the world has grown. Environmental concerns mean that the importance placed on such areas grows and their rarity contributes to our perception of them as sites of wonder and or beauty. This partially recalls an idealistic, Romantic notion of experiencing sublime beauty in untouched nature, once the spur to so much exploratory travel, but now contributes to the case for the establishment of protectionist schemes, such as National Parks and nature reserves.

Warning against the acceptance of such a dichotomy in considerations of the environment – good nature v. evil culture – Paul Shephard concludes his own exploration of 'The Cultivated Wilderness'<sup>2</sup> with the idea that: 'The wilderness is beautiful because you are part of it.' He not only acknowledges the complexity of our relations with landscape, but also stresses the centrality of human perception, of the subjective in our understanding of the world. A 'pure' objective response or action may be impossible, but we need to at least be aware of this in considering and strategizing our landscape.

The wilderness and how we relate to it seems an appropriate way of approaching Olafur Eliasson's installation for Dundee Contemporary Arts. Entitled **Your position surrounded and your surroundings positioned**, the work is comprised of three spatially distinct but related elements, illustrated in this book. In the large gallery and its two small adjoining rooms, continual movement and potential change, present in each of the elements, are the foundations of the work's action upon the viewer. Encouraging a 'live' experience of the space, together these elements provoke an intense awareness of the viewer's environs.

As a whole, the installation offered both a glimpse of how space is constituted and read and a strong sense of each individual's centrality in that reading, the fundamental and indivisible importance of the subjective in our experience.

In DCA's large gallery, two simple lanterns, each constructed around 2,000-watt light bulbs, were positioned off-centre. Their cylindrical metal casings, broken only by one tall, narrow slit on each, allowed a slim band of white light to escape, illuminating any surface onto which it falls. The casings, rotating silently at slightly different speeds, are propelled simply by the circulation of the air around them, warmed by the intense heat of the bulbs. Their unregulated speed is therefore subject to sudden change, dependent on the surrounding movement and temperature. While the narrow slit restricts the vertical spread of the light, an evidently hand-made, black foil mask around the outside of each serves to 'focus' the light on the gallery walls – never its floor or ceiling. On close examination, the

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<sup>1</sup> Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, from the Preface to his *Scientific Studies* ed. Douglas Miller, New York, Suhrkamp, 1988.

<sup>2</sup> Paul Shephard *The Cultivated Wilderness: or What is Landscape?*, MIT Press, 1997, p.233.

masks can be seen to echo the details of the gallery space – at a certain point, the profile of the roof is legible. Largely, however, they are comprised of gentle curves. Each mask, carefully shaped to suit exactly and uniquely the singular position of each lantern is, in effect, an alternative map of the gallery space, showing a precise optical reading of its perimeter, translating the rectilinear space to a cylindrical form.

In the two small adjoining rooms are diverse perceiving mechanisms. In the first room, a camera obscura, replicating the mechanics of the human eye, presents an inverted, moving image of the view beyond the gallery wall. The image appears on a small screen suspended at eye-level in the space. In the second of the small rooms, a blue plastic tunnel leads to a kind of makeshift weather station attached directly to the room's window. The station is equipped with a number of devices for reading and predicting the physical conditions of the immediate surroundings. What initially appears a purposeful, if amateur, endeavour to assess climactic and environmental conditions – thermometer, barometer, compass, wind-speed indicator and a luminous orange windsock visible on the terrace outside the gallery – is rendered absurd by the inclusion of a spirit level and altimeter.

The apparent aim, however, seems to be to help us understand the prevailing conditions of our surroundings, *'as if we were afraid of them, which of course we are.'*<sup>3</sup>

Such a straightforward description of the installation neglects the work's singlemost important component: the viewer. Any human presence in the large space both had the possible effect of altering the speed of rotation of the lanterns, but also of course creates shadows on the gallery walls, extending the principal of potential change, the work's refusal to stand still and be examined.

Eliasson's transparent application of simple technologies, familiar from previous works, is coupled in **Your position surrounded and your surroundings positioned** with an indication of our reliance on legible, objective interfaces, measures that stand between a direct sensory experience and the true empirically established, true nature of the object of contemplation. The weather station presents readings that are, after all, broadly available to us unaided: we can easily tell what way the wind is blowing just by standing in it. Both the camera obscura and the climate monitoring equipment are examples of mechanical objectifying technologies, devices which allow us to read and understand our environs in some sort of supposed universal, objective language. Just as a map allows knowledge of a terrain without direct experience of it, the two offer knowledge, removed from experience, of the outside from the inside.

To stand outside DCA is to find oneself in an area loaded with a sense of limits and thresholds. The building sits by the expansive River Tay just before it joins the North Sea, straddled by two long, low bridges. The land on which it sits is itself intensely 'cultivated', having been reclaimed from the river for industrial use in the nineteenth century. In the dock, not five minutes' walk from DCA, lies the Royal Research Ship Discovery, the Dundee-built ship on which Captain Scott first sailed to the Antarctic in 1901. The drive to conquer the Pole eventually led to the infamous, fatal expedition of 1910-12<sup>4</sup>, but this first expedition's principal success

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<sup>3</sup> Olafur Eliasson, from a talk given at Dundee Contemporary Arts, 6 October 1999. All quotes from the artist are from the same source.

<sup>4</sup> Scott did reach the Pole on their second Antarctic expedition, but only hours after it was in fact 'claimed' by the Norwegian, Roald Amundsen. Scott and his party subsequently perished in severe conditions before they were able to return to their base. Scott's journal

was to reach a record-breaking southern latitude, going beyond the 80° south previously attained. When Scott and his party arrived at the limit of previous explorations, their charts showed only blank white paper beyond this point, an apt metaphor for what actually appeared before them: an expanse of white space stretching as far as the eye could see.

Scott and his colleagues' desires to conquer and contain, enduring brutal conditions in unknown surroundings, is an important example of the empiricist drive to know and understand the world objectively. To record, distil and translate readings taken by technological devices to form a universally applicable understanding. But one can only wonder at the sheer immediacy of the experience at the point of coincidence of blank chart and blank wilderness in the bodies and minds of men so steeped in the importance of objective knowledge. One can't help but speculate that perhaps the blank chart could have been the best possible map of 'the last great wilderness' that was Antarctica.

What the actual charts now available to us cannot offer is the sensory experience of that place – the severe temperature, the deafening noise of the wind, the blinding whiteness of the snow. While they deliver an amount of information, they also introduce a filter, for as the geographers' endeavours push back the boundaries between the known and the unknown, they introduce a new limit, like a membrane, between knowledge and experience.

It is this membrane that Olafur Eliasson's work offers for exploration. Just as it focuses on the boundaries between inside and outside, **Your position surrounded ...** negotiates an encounter between knowledge and experience, or rather it exposes the existence of a realm between the two, which includes both subjective experience and objective knowledge. It emphasises the viewer's position '*at the centre of his / her world*'<sup>5</sup>. As the lamps scan the space and anyone in it, their light inscribes anything present into the architecture and emphasises the vertical surfaces' function as the delineation of that space. Having entered the space to look at what it contains, the viewer finds him/herself part of a spatial experiment.

Eliasson's installations and environments create experiences that pose the question of what we see and with whose eyes: '*do we see the reality or do we see something that has already been conceived by somebody else and we therefore see through them?*'<sup>6</sup>. His work for DCA encourages us to really look at space, to try to understand it as if for the first time, to surpass our previous knowledge and indulge in the experience, the sheer spatial exploration, using the adjoining rooms to keep a sense of the space's location on the world. Like shining a torch into an unknown, darkened room, it exposes the edges, the limits of that space. Instead of allowing us to deal with the space and its position as a neutral container for what is presented therein, Eliasson brings the absolute materiality of the space to the fore. In **Your position surrounded ...** the experience of the architecture is made immediate, rendering the space's configuration and delineation apparent.

Previous works, such as his *Icerink* for São Paulo, allowed the viewer a direct, real, experience of a natural substance known, even understood, but perhaps not experienced (especially in São Paulo), using that substance to articulate the boundary between two conditions. For Eliasson, that experience is the most important arena in which to operate, countering the scientific privileging of

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entry on the day they reached the Pole only to realise they were not to be first reads: '*Great God! This is an awful place and terrible enough for us to have laboured to it without the reward of priority.*' (17 January 1911). See [www.rrsdiscovery.com](http://www.rrsdiscovery.com) for more information.

<sup>5</sup> OE.

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objective knowledge over subjective experience. The primacy he places on the subjective recalls the arguments put forward by Goethe, most significantly in his *Scientific Studies* and his *Theory of Colour*. Warning against the interposing of instruments between the subject and object, or perceiver and phenomenon, Goethe insisted that a consideration of nature ‘*must remain as mobile and plastic as the example nature provides us*’<sup>7</sup>. He actually advocated a reliance on the senses:

*‘In so far as he makes use of his healthy senses, the human being is the greatest and most precise scientific instrument that can exist. And precisely this is the greatest disservice of modern science: that it has divorced the experiment from the human being, and wants to know nature only through that which is shown by instruments.’*<sup>8</sup>

Scott’s body would after all have told him it was fiercely, intolerably cold at 80° South. A position as extreme as that proposed by Goethe of course recalls a deeply romantic, and traditionally Northern European relationship to the landscape, no longer seen as a viable, scientific option today. But it stands as a valuable realm of human experience, which Eliasson’s art now allows and encourages us to explore.

The establishment of universal chartings and readings is of course not for individual but social application. It allows experience to be communicated in a useful form to extend society’s knowledge. As Deleuze has pointed out, ‘*Machines are social before being technical.*’<sup>9</sup>

Eliasson’s work at DCA explores this social aspect of technology, both camera obscura and weather station offering controlled, isolated, readings of our surroundings, but readings which can simultaneously be shared by more than one person. The work crucially recognises the viewer as actor, rather than simply as perceiving subject. Though viewers remain individuated and differentiated, each with a strong sense of his / her position in space and relation to others who share it, they are connected and truly inter-active. Included in the core of the work immediately on entering the space, by dint of the moving bands of light, the viewer cannot readily objectify the work, for all its initial appearance as two sculptural forms positioned in a white cube.

The technologies Eliasson uses are low-tech, old, simple ones, pertaining to an era of modernist belief in the possibilities of machines as vehicles for the expansion of knowledge and the enhancement of the quality of life. They speak of a time when discovering the constituency of the earth was expected to reveal man’s best uses of it, how best to cultivate. These technical devices were not just about sparing us menial tasks, or providing universal standards, they were constructed to enhance our ability to conquer the wilderness.

Our first defence against that wilderness is the built environment – the architect’s walls are what stop untamed nature from rushing in. Architecture is the principle boundary between us and the elements, providing protection from what might harm us. It is the antithesis of the wilderness. To imagine, as Shepheard does, that the wilderness is in fact everywhere and that conversely the whole world is now cultivated – ‘radio waves carrying coded messages cascade across the atmosphere’<sup>10</sup> - is to question the reality of the physical boundaries, limitations

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<sup>7</sup> Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, ‘The Purpose Set Forth’, from his ‘*Scientific Studies*’, quoted in *Goethe’s Way of Science*, eds. D. Seamon and A. Zajonc, SUNY Press, 1998, p.48.

<sup>8</sup> Goethe, ‘*Wilhelm Meister’s Journeymanhood*’, quoted in Seamon and Zajonc, *ibid.*, p. 37-38.

<sup>9</sup> Gilles Deleuze, ‘*Foucault*’, Minneapolis, 1988, p.13. Quoted in Jonathan Crary, ‘*Techniques of the Observer*’, October / MIT, 1990, p.31.

and delineation in our space. It asks us to consider how we might better deal with the matter of the world around us.

What Shephard proposes is akin to what occurs in the questioning of Eliasson's work. He simultaneously blurs boundaries and makes those boundaries the focus of our interest, though they almost disappear on examination. What we first see as light is in fact space, or the components of space - the light being only visible when it meets something that resists it. '*When nothing arrests our gaze, it carries a very long way. But if it meets with nothing, it sees nothing, it sees only what it meets. Space is what arrests our gaze, what our sight stumbles over: the obstacle, bricks, an angle, a vanishing point. Space is when it makes an angle, when it stops, when we have to turn for it to start off again. There's nothing ectoplasmic about space; it has edges, it doesn't go off in all directions, it does all that needs to be done for railway lines to meet well short of infinity.*'<sup>11</sup>

The light in Eliasson's installation at DCA draws the eye to the edges of the space it inhabits, but it also enacts a play of absence and presence. The shadows cast by people present in the space imply real presences, though they are of course actual absences, absences of light. A kind of undulation between presence and absence runs as a current through the entire work, through its many interplays; between interior and exterior, subject and object, dark and light, circle and square, knowledge and experience. Its unfolding occurs not in a simplistic expression of polarities, but in an indefinable yet intensely tangible domain between these poles, actually in the interface. Any attempt to shift one's reading towards either extreme in these relationships serves only to make its opposite all the more present, each being defined by the other.

Scanning, searching for meaningful presences or significant absences from which to construe a 'true' impression, both lamp and viewer perform a similar function. What the human mind brings to the process is the vast complexity of perception psychology. How do we establish what the reality is? How much of what we see is illusion? If the eye instantaneously inverts what it registers, unlike the *camera obscura*, in order that we see the world 'the right way up', what other tricks might it perform?

If, as Perec wrote, '*our field of vision reveals a limited space, something vaguely circular, which ends very quickly to the left and right, and doesn't extend very far up or down*'<sup>12</sup>, then Eliasson's lanterns' black masks are a truer map of how we see our surroundings than a rectilinear architectural plan. And if we cannot truly and confidently see the space as an objective, neutral container, we must engage with it in a meaningful, primary and immediate experience, one which denies the more habitual performance of secondary re-cognition. Questioning the grounds on which our truths are founded, **Your position surrounded ...** strips us of prescience and forces us into a space and place bristling with meaning, a tangible, physical experience, not to be measured. The viewer like the lamp, is the circle in the square, the privileged core from which a unique experience originates.

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<sup>10</sup> Shephard, *ibid.*, p.9.

<sup>11</sup> Georges Perec, 'Space', p.81 in '*Species of Spaces and Other Pieces*', Penguin, 1997, p.81. (Translated from the French, '*Espèces d'Espaces*', Editions Galilée, 1974)

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p.81.

<sup>13</sup> Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, from the Preface to his '*Scientific Studies*' ed. Douglas Miller, New York, Suhrkamp, 1988.