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BRIGHT SHADOWS

A Conversation between Olafur Eliasson and Ina Blom

The following text is an excerpt from a series of conversations with Olafur Eliasson about the relation between media, perception, and the production of space in his work. The point of departure for these conversations was my interest in the lamp as a strategic figure in Eliasson's work. This work, which rarely resorts to more obvious media technologies like film, video or television, nevertheless manages to make us reflect on the way in which perception and thinking today takes place in the middle of media machines. As I saw it, it was above all the figure of the lamp that was able to trigger such reflection – a reflection on the temporal and spatial issues of media perception that could come into focus only by omitting the more obvious references to media contents or media representations. The fact that Eliasson always emphasized the presence of lamps objects as the concrete sources of light in his work (instead of just presenting spectacular light effects) was significant, since lamps indicate inhabited surrounds, places where bodies feel at home. And the specific ways in which these lamps were put to use, opened perspectives on how today such inhabited spaces and situations are formed by the continual presence of streaming media. My hypothesis was that these lamps were then, in a specific sense of the word, "televisual". A dialogue on this hypothesis took off when, to my delight, I was informed about the development of a work that will be at once lamp and television.

This excerpt starts at the point where we have spent some time discussion the recent proliferation of lamps in Olafur Eliasson's practice – not only the projector lamps that have been a fixture in his work for many years, but also more domestic looking-lamps or "design"-oriented lamps. We are both interested in the way such lamps may function as mediators that may make you aware of your own perceptual creation of space. The question is how to qualify this type of self-awareness. (Ina Blom, December 2005).

OE: To take one example of a work that could be used in a domestic setting: I'm working on what I call a "dark star lamp", a lamp that is based on a sphere made of iris shutters. So instead of just turning the lamp on or off, one can for instance close all the eyes on the lamp and just leave one eye open: here you will have just one of a number of different possible versions of illuminated space. In such a case a lamp may become a mediator – it can mediate the space in which it is placed in the sense that it can dramatically manipulate what is highlighted and what remains in darkness. So that, in a way, you create your own spatial drama...

IB: ... which again means that you can manipulate and observe your own perception of domestic space?

OE: Yes, exactly. And I hope that by doing so one does not just appeal to the consumerist aspects of manipulation – but rather to the self-reflexive potential of *Gestaltung*. You can organize your surroundings and also think about the fact that you are doing it.

IB: I would like to perhaps discuss this dichotomy between consumerism and self-reflection. In Jonathan Crary's texts on your work there is for instance all the time the projection of a contrast between a "bad", standardized and consumerist mediascape or technoscape and the a kind of "good" self-reflexive technoscape that your work has the potential for producing, because of its appeals to subjective and situated situations of perception and so on. I can

definitely identify with the hopeful feeling of this projection (i.e. that artistic productions may provide liberating alternatives to the dominant power scenarios). But given the way a large part of contemporary production now capitalizes on the creative potential of individual perception and memory, to the extent that such production may actually be named “production of subjectivity”, I am not entirely sure that it is possible to set up such a clear-cut dichotomy between bad and benign technoscapes on the basis of the notion of a difference between commercial standardization and individual reflection. I think that work of the type you do is crucial and important precisely because it employs a logic that is so much *closer* to current economic production than one would normally prefer to imagine. Today value is not created simply because one is able to efficiently distribute homogenized media products, but because the media environments in which we seem to live and in which a whole range of very different media contents are processed, are able to appeal to us as highly sensitized, reflective and creative individuals. Our creative attention is precisely what is sought after here – as Maurizio Lazzarato says, it should be understood as seen as a form of energy that is continually extracted for profit. I just wanted to bring that into our discussion, because it means that the eventual liberating potential of your work will have to be thought in a somewhat different way.

OE: This is very relevant and of course this is something that I’m trying to engage with, because if you take one of the other of the two extremes (consumerism vs. liberating creation), one or the extreme somehow wins the argument and then no more can be said. My way of working with this could perhaps be seen more as a matter of setting up different trajectories. Generally speaking there can be a conflict of interest in the trajectories in the sense that they are directed against each other, and then you end up with nothing. So in an odd way doing something which is not at all consumerist and then you send it against something that is very consumerist ... You end up having none of these, in an odd way. I guess my interest in this type of argument comes out of the fact that the art institution has now become part of the experience industry. I don’t know if one can say that the art institutions themselves really changed a lot except for getting a greater awareness of the importance of branding, so I think that it is rather the market potential of the experience industry that has changed. So the production of experiences in the art system has in a sense been colonized by the market driven experiences. In this context I am trying, perhaps naively, to create experiences that make it possible to evaluate or think the very production of experiences. And I see some kind of critical potential in this type of reflection or introspection. Mainly this discussion is about responsibility and consequences. What kind of consequences do such reflective experiences have and who has the responsibility to present such reflection in society?

The consumer-oriented production of experience clearly appeals to our sensitivities, and we should be careful about establishing rigid hierarchies or quality systems based on the difference between “commercial” and “non-commercial”. But when I talk about a conflict of trajectories in my work it refers to the fact that in the experience industries it is generally seen as counterproductive to the commercial potential of a situation if it makes you evaluate the nature of the experience in which you are engaging *while* you are engaging in it! I have – and this is a very old-school argument – faith in the artistic engagement in society due to its introspective nature.

IB: I think this introspection could be discussed in terms that have to do with temporality. The type of production that extracts energy from the way we spend time with, or pay attention to, media output, is notably also seen as a production of time. The idea of live-ness and presence is key here: you simply have to be there, to be connected, so to speak, as things unfold in time. Hence the phenomenon of the “media event” and so on. So the question is of course what kind of time is produced in artistic work that moves closely along with this type of production all the while also creating the possibility of reflection on this production. I think the interestingly ambivalent quality of a lot of recent artwork has to do with how such work reduplicate the ways in which we spending time in and with the live media feed, rather than how we process or understand specific types of media content. And to the extent that they produce reflections

on this way of spending time, this type of artistic work may actually contribute to a momentary *freeing of time*. The moment the exploitation of time for economic production – the creation of media events – is discussed, thought, demonstrated or presented it necessarily implies that time itself, in its qualitative dimensions (that is as a source of continual production of the unexpected, of events) is also, so to speak, let loose.

OE: In this context lack of self-reflection implies that time is in a sense controlled, whereas self-reflection puts a different duration into time. So thinking through things allows for time to become a conscious element of our perceptual situation and through this it becomes much more individualized, much more singular. Whereas a non-reflexive type of experiences refer to our senses as representations or as pictures of our senses and thus takes out the time component. In this way they contribute to a form of generalization that objectifies not only our bodies but also our awareness of our bodies.

IB: So then I guess the interesting question is how you would like to imagine that people will approach the situations you set up ... what elements will contribute to the experience of immersion or simply “being-there” within the mediascape, and what elements will trigger the self-reflexive impulses?

OE: If we should look at this as a kind of sequence, there is a certain narrative buildup in the sense that you are not simply confronted with phenomena such as light effects or light play. You pass by the lamps, and only then do you arrive at the phenomena. It’s as if I would ask a cinema audience to walk through the projection room before sitting down to see the film. And since the lamps I use are often placed on tripods or some kind of construction like that, they are generally quite utilitarian-looking. Still – and this is perhaps because their functionality is so stark and so extreme - people tend to ignore them and immediately focus on whatever it is that they project. However, I would all the same argue that if we imagine that the lamp had been placed behind a wall, and that there was a hole in the wall where the light would come through so that the projection would just be presented without the lamp being visibly present, there would be less *time* in the work, in the sense that we just discussed. And you would have a situation where people would on the one hand experience the phenomena and on the other hand maybe wonder about how they were produced. This would, as I see it, take away the possibility to engage with the very construction of sense-perception (rather than with the technological magic behind projections) – the possibility to evaluate not just what we see but also how we see it. The great thing about lamps – as opposed to for instance film or video projections of the same type of phenomena – is that they facilitate this type of evaluation.

IB: But I think there is another aspect here as well, depending on what type of lamp is used. For some lamps may come across as just potentially “utilitarian” in the sense you indicate. A projector lamp on a tripod will of course usually be seen as super functional – they are never used to just light up ordinary living environments. But I think that a lamp like the “moon lamp” that you have over your table here (a pendulum lamp that has the same light intensity as moonlight) might in a certain sense be ignored. One might perhaps just enjoy the atmosphere it produces, and then only potentially think of the lamp’s mediating operations. In that sense the potential for immersion is obviously greater ... once a lamp is a bit more of a “design object” the situation is more ambivalent. The question is how to understand such immersive situations. I’m not sure that immersion here stands in opposition to reflection ... I think the very *appeal* to immerse yourself is a very strong aspect of your work and it gives people a distinct sense of the fact that there is, actually, available yet somehow “unframed” or “unformatted” time in the work and that one might want to engage with this time.

OE: Yes.

IB: So what you produce is the very sensation of a seductive form of live presence ...

OE: Yes, I guess it is complex, because the increase of attention to design issues does not, as I thought ten years ago, decrease the attention to the question of time. But, if I may throw in a completely wild argument ... don't you think that there is a proportional relationship between with the question of the loss of shade or shadow and the increase of design? The more designed a lamp becomes, the more you lose the sense of your own shadow. This (points to moon lamp) is a more designed type of lamp and the light here is diffused in all directions. Design effort is all the time very much towards diffusion and functional light is often about parallelism (or clarity). The sun beams are absolutely parallel, which is why we have such strong shadows. With a very good parallel beam lamp, you can have each single hair on a person's head cast a shadow. You will not find a designer lamp that does this, because fundamentally design is about something else

IB: So what are, for you, the consequences of this?

OE: This does of course not really do justice to design, but I think that a loss of shadow implies a certain loss of definition. Part of the agenda of design is about fashion - which is, again, about generalization: It suggests universal rather than singular ways of engaging with the world, and this is where I find the lack of social agenda in design – in the design protocol or design ideology – problematic.

IB: Loss of shadow - loss of singularity? The obvious analogue for that thought might perhaps be Heidegger's notion of the world picture – the totalizing technological representation of the world, where nothing escapes the light of representation. This interpretation on the modern technoscape seems somehow parallel to your ideas of a diffused light where everything is equally and generally visible, without shadows. For Heidegger uses the metaphor of the shadow to indicate what somehow escapes the world as picture. In fact, it is through this shadow, which is in fact an inseparable part of the world as picture, that the world may be revealed *as* such a totalizing picture. Samuel Weber discusses this in an interesting essay on how Walter Benjamin's famous concept of aura does not simply indicate a type of aesthetic "presence" that belongs to an earlier epoch, but the form of continual and paradoxical "presenting" of distant phenomena that is one of the defining traits of modern media culture. To the extent that such presences are never full, but indicators of a continual differentiation of time and space, a production of difference, Weber sees such shadows – produced so to speak in the glow of media – as bright shadows A kind of light that differentiates itself from the totalizing visuality of the world picture. And perhaps the notion of a bright shadow could be a useful metaphor for the potential of the different types of lamps or lamp situations to produce different forms of reflection?

OE: Yes, exactly. The types of lamps that I am interested in introduces physicality back into a shadow-less world – they are shadow producers even more than they are light producers. So it is not about lamps as objects but a negotiation of issues of abstraction or generalization. Shadow makes things less abstract ... Here we could take as example a case where I use a specific type of diffused light. I am working on what is to become a white cube illumination system for a museum. I would like to suggest a color – white – the white of the walls that are background to paintings and sculptures etc. - as the light itself. This particular light will have absolutely no shadow, it will be completely diffused. And by means of this diffused light I would like to take another look at the whole issue of perception and its social dimensions within an aesthetic and communicative situation. It is not about the light per se – but about engaging with all that goes on in this particular context. I would set up this light situation only in the entrance area of the museum, and have light in the floor as well, particularly in the areas where the floor is slightly sloping. So this might become a way of dealing with our whole sense of physicality in relation to such a situation as well.

IB: What we have here is, in other words, a case of a diffused light that might potentially come to function as producer of shadows?

OE: Yes, that's it.

IB What we should perhaps discuss then is the way in which your work seem to evoke the spatial and atmospheric impact of the most common mediatic technologies – most notably, film, TV and video – without actually deploying these technologies themselves. I find this particularly significant because I think that in this way you are able to bypass the overarching focus on specific media contents and conventions that seems to govern most analyses of media, whether such analyses are oriented towards aesthetics or political issues or both. Such analyses are obviously of great significance, but I think that they also tend to deflect from an engagement with the pressing issue of how perception and thinking today takes place in the middle of media machines, since these machines – which are the key operators of the so-called cognitive capitalism – manage to mimic human perception and thinking in their way of working. And once you take an interest in this perspective it obviously becomes more difficult to imagine a simple “outside” in relation to the so-called “society of the spectacle”. In your work you set up aesthetic situations which seem to open for a sort of sophisticated “phenomenology of perception”, presented through strange and paradoxical spatial experiences, while, at the same time, giving hints of the existence of some kind of media machinery which is not actually present as such. Through this strategy you seem to make it possible to somehow “perceive” not just perception in general but, more particularly, perception in the age of media machines. For me, the most significant thing here is how, in this work, actual space and spatial atmospherics is something that is continually produced in terms of a kind of mutable real-time temporality which is obviously the temporality of media machines.

There are several works we could discuss in connection with this, but perhaps particularly the work – shown at the Astrup Fearnley Museum among other places – where quite specific architectural spaces seemed to continually emerge and change through movements of projector lamps.

OE: The work is called *Remagine* and initially it was about the fact that due to our sense of perspective we have trained our eye to see depth with only a very few elements suggesting a perspectival vanishing point. And the amazing powers in the lines moving towards the vanishing point is what drives this piece, because it seems that the projected planes of white wall, which are produced by simply illuminating the existing walls in the exhibition space, seem to be either closer or further away. So it was all about using this kind of theatre stage technique that makes it possible to create illusions of depth or distance simply by illuminating just parts of a wall.

But then I added the element of sequence, and the notion behind the use of sequence was the idea of suspense, the idea that by fading in a light you immediately have a drama of some sort. In this work the intensity of the light increases and the fade is on an average 20 seconds for each single projection –and each projection runs separately in a random system which will probably only repeat itself in 10 or 12 years or something. And when you have an increase of intensity in the beginning and you don't know how intense it's eventually going to be (especially because the lamps closer to the walls project perpendicularly on the wall they get very intense) you have a continual production of dramatic suspense. I did three versions of this piece – small, medium, and large, with three, seven and twelve lamps respectively - and especially with the very big one the work becomes like a movie, with a sort of narrative feel to it, and of course the whole thing could have been done much more easily with a video projection. But I wanted to do it as an analogue piece, with the lamps. I never even considered doing it as a video, because the video would encourage one to focus on the narrative aspect only.

IB: That's what I think too. I think that a video used in this way would simply be a representation, a film you'd made. But in this case it was an actual spatial transformation which was exciting precisely because you have a counterintuitive drive to see it as a movie of

sorts. You “know” it is not a movie, yet your way of seeing is completely informed by a cinematic form of perception. Actual space and simple lamplight turned into a cinematic projection in front of your eyes.

OE: Other types of work I have done have also often been misinterpreted as video projections. A typical example is a 1994 piece in which I use the same kind of projector lamp as in *Remagine*. This lamp projects a circle of light onto a shallow plastic pool which has a few centimeters of water inside it and a dripping device above it. Water drips into the pool and the reflections from the pool and the dripping creates a pattern of moving rings on the wall. But the funny thing with this piece is that, despite the fact that all the elements of the construction are clearly visible: the pool, the projector lamp and the dripping device, people always said “I see the light illuminating the pool, but where is the video projector?” Because the morphological qualities of the wall image was so astonishing, it was beyond people’s imagination that this could simply come from the reflection of the water - it *had to* come from a computer generated video image. This was just after films like *Terminator 2* or *3* and the sort of quicksilver computer generations used in this film were very similar to what this wall image looked like. At this time you also got the first “blob type” computer generated architecture. So because of a certain media impact people were very much aware of this type of imagery and everywhere I showed it people thought that the spotlight only illuminated the surface of the water, despite the fact that the angle of the projector and the basin should have made the reflection entirely logical. So this is a very good example of how our imagination all the time shortcuts to representation.

IB: Well, if you look at the early history of video art there is of course a tremendous amount of work done on the relation between the real-time medium and the processes of perception, thinking and memory. The most typical case is perhaps the use of the closed circuit situation, where what is shown on the screen is not images transmitted from some other time or place but a real-life situation that is watching its own televisual diffusion at the same time as it is “lived” – a typical example of erasing or at least complicating the distinction between real-time and lived time.

OE: I have actually discovered a small closed circuit phenomenon that I am working with I guess it is perhaps only now I realize that I can actually call it a closed circuit. If you look into a lamp and you look away you have the afterimage. And if you’re a trained afterimage spotter (I have trained myself to become one, during the dark months of the year) and you look into a lamp for about 10-12 seconds you will have a clear and bright afterimage. Now, if you don’t move your head at all, theoretically, the afterimage will not move either. If you don’t move your eyes at all, the afterimage will hang at the place on the wall opposite you all the time. Now this is very hard to do, because, as your eye moves all the time and you can’t hold it still, the afterimage seems to float. So the dot of light starts floating to the right and the “eye” starts looking at it floating to the right. Because this is a *camera obscura* situation and the afterimage is in your eye moving to the right and your eye starts moving to the left, what happens is that the dot accelerates and drifts off ... This is a closed circuit phenomenon, and if you get to know it you can start playing around with it and you can make a drawing with it, if you want. And this drawing will be a tracing of the spatial trajectory created by the movement of your eyes, and if you practice a bit you can become quite good at it.

I did a talk at the Städelschule in Frankfurt last Monday where I had a projector and I projected into people’s eyes and told them to look at a fixed spot on the wall behind me. So by moving the lamp I could basically raw a simple line-drawing into their eyes. After doing this for about 30 seconds I would have a drawing. It is something that I have practiced a bit in order to find out how fast or slow I will have to move and so on. And when look at a neutral wall afterwards they will see a fading image or “recording” of my light drawing. The fade is proportional in time to the pace and duration of my drawing. I can develop this further and also ask them the move their heads or eyes while I hold the lamp still and by doing so – and then moving their eyes on the wall behind the bright spotlight - they can make their own

drawing in their eye which of course will be completely individual because it will depend on how you move your head. I could also blend two drawings by first ask the audience to make their own drawing by moving the eyes and then make an additional drawings on top by moving the light and thus create a sort of collaborative mixture of my drawing and their eye movements. But the funny thing is that these two drawings then starts to drift around – it is a movement that you see that you see, a real closed circuit experience. So this technique is actually a way of making people into lamps, illuminating their own seeing.

IB: This seems to me a very good example of why video technology so closely resembles the processes of perception. Another thing that interests me – in extension of this theme – is the way in which what we might perhaps call the underlying mediatic discourse in your work is expressed through an interest in various types of signalitic materials and processes, such as, for instance, vibrations and wavelengths, and the significance of such phenomena for a different notion of the production of space. To me, all these phenomena somehow come together in the work you are currently developing – the lamp whose light are generated by television signals.

OE: I actually started this type of research working with wavelengths and the question of more or less harmonic vibrations. I had done a couple of different drawing machines and this again started when I tried to make a time machine. To make a long story short, I could do a chaotic drawing machine, but I also realized I could make a harmonic drawing. And I realized that what happens in such a drawing would be just like what happens on a guitar, when you have the strings vibrate together. I then instantly started to make a string instrument, something between a guitar and a cello, electric or non electric. But basically my interest was to create waves and vibrations. And from there on it is a very short way to an interest in frequencies and wavelengths and to the whole idea that light simply consists of wavelengths - different wavelengths ...

IB: That was precisely Nam June Paik's point of departure when, in the early 1960's, he started to use television and video technology rather than just stick to the audiotape technology that was the "instrument" of electronic composers at the time. What interested him was the fact that the difference between sound signals and light signals is basically just a matter of a difference in frequency. An interest in signalitic materials blurred the distinction between visual and sonic practices.

OE: Exactly, yes. But my own interest in wave phenomena or vibrations - the idea that waves or vibrations or interference patterns might actually form a separate dimension - comes out of my interest in the idea of a somewhat non-Euclidian conception of space. I was fascinated by the ephemeral character of waves, the fact that they react on you and interact with you. And then there is turbulence which is of course a causal phenomenon ... This was my general idea of a field that I could work with.

What is also important here is the idea of bandwidth and different ways of translating the idea of bandwidth to spatial terms. In traditional geometry you would consider it a line, which has long waves in the one end and short waves in the other end, and basically the only difference is that the waves has a less frequently occurring peak in the long waves than the sinus curve at the other end. But if you add a depth dimension to this as well, then you see also the information carried in each wave length: all the telephone signals and the satellite transmissions and so on would get a visual, spatial form. Then we would so to speak have the topography of bandwidth, a map of sorts. But if we continue adding dimensions, we could add the time dimension and then we would be able to see how this map has developed over time. This would be a very rich and interesting form considering how much communication and information technology has changed over time. Such a perspective would also add a cosmological dimension, since the orbits of the planets around the sun has daylight and nightlight, so the intensity of UV light changes at different points in time. I think that in fact one could just go on adding dimensions and if you chose just a certain point in time and place

on the planet, then certain types of information would fall out and other would become visible. But the main point is, I guess, that you could refer to these phenomena in spatial terms and by this I really do not mean a virtual space, but a space in which one can engage physically. Wave, frequencies and bandwidth contribute to spatial and even architectural concerns – my idea is really to put them to use in architectural situations rather than just discussing them in terms of virtual reality.

IB: If I understand you correctly this implies, among other things, that you take phenomena and concepts that most of us relate to only through the media technologies that is today part of our physical and mental environment and translate this to environmental terms that are not connected to specific media or media technologies, only to the generative potential of signaletic material. However, I am curious to know more about how you would consider such spaces in physical and perceptual terms.

OE: If we consider that the experience of a work comprises a work, the viewing subject, and the experience itself – then we could talk about it as a field of energy, and by all means a non-holistic one. And if at least for now we say that how I conceive of a work could be called a projection of vibrations, because my senses are pulsating and vibrating even as I am just talking ... If I see the painting on the wall or the light in the ceiling it is also only because light is coming from them as waves. So without stressing the argument a lot, we can call all this as an energetic field. The only problem with this is that such terms have been colonized by all sorts of esoteric and holistic movements ... but I still think it is possible to use them as an opening towards a different understanding of spatial relations.

So if we consider a vibration in a three-dimensional space, it could be an object orbiting around a certain determined coordinate system. Let's say we have a little object orbiting, and with the time dimension it has one orbit per half second. If I now add an element of gravity it is going to change its orbital activity and at some point it will stop or go faster and faster and loose its relation to gravity the way a planet leaves a solar system and starts travelling. Now, if I add another object, with another orbit in this system and maybe a different impact of forces (of time and gravity), every orbit takes maybe two minutes. If I leave these two orbiting for two months they will have created two patterns, and if those two patterns happen to be harmonic, you will have a recurring correspondence of patterns, and this means that you will have a spatial structure that has a certain of a certain organization. If they happen to be non-harmonic, then patterns will be chaotic and only randomly overlapping. This means that you could take non-harmonic or harmonic patterns and use that as a point of departure for generating different spatial shapes. And you could enlarge such shapes so that they became 10 or 15 meters high, which means that you could stand in them and even add some orbital movements if your body would be able to tolerate it. Such a space would of course just be an illustration of a principle, but I would argue that these individualizations of vibrations contain structures that are not at all present in classical or modern classical conceptions of architecture and that your body can also engage with. I could give one example of a work where translated such phenomena into actual spatial configurations (*Sonne Statt Regen, Lembachhaus, Munich 2003*) A wall was generated simply on the basis of waves or vibrations, light waves, in fact. And I was also working with the concept bandwidth in the sense we were talking about before. I saw each colour as just a thicker or thinner bandwidth. So the thickness of the walls kept on changing as if bandwidth were considered an architectural or spatial thing.

I'm not saying such structures are any better than the ones with which we usually surround ourselves. It is just a different principle of spatial generation, and this is one of the reasons I got so interested in waves and vibrations. What is even more interesting is the fact that every material has a wavelength, for the most part very short wavelength, but you could actually see the table and the floor etc. in terms of vibrations. If you manage to hit the wavelength of a window you can make it vibrate, like the skin of a drum. The world is not static, but in a continual process of becoming, and vibrations and wavelengths are tools that may help to bring this to our awareness.