

WITH INADVERTENT RELIANCE

By Marianne Krogh Jensen

Toward a critique of modernism's conception of space and humanity

Many artists who are working today with spatial problems and experiences, and who actively involve the spectator's participation in the work, simultaneously take their marks in a critique of certain ways that space has been organized in modern art and architecture. Among other themes, this critique addresses the fact that modernistic space has at times exercised a kind of control over or disciplining of the spectator's experience of and movements in the space, even if such a control has been inadvertent; The space has frequently been meticulously orchestrated with clearly defined forms and geometry (the straight line) has served as the guiding principle for the 'free movement'. The purposeful, the concretely measurable and the necessary communication were rendered more accessible, while all that was 'unintentional', the accidental meeting and the friction were eventually reduced and impeded. It is these kinds of ideals about rationality and calculation that are today being placed under attack since we can see by now that it is impossible to take into consideration and administer all of life's dimensions in one universalistic structural-model of space and time.

One of the critics is the American historian Brian O'Doherty, whose little book, *Inside The White Cube*, from 1976, has exerted a colossal significance on an entire generation of visual artists¹: In his book, O'Doherty characterizes the modernistic exhibition space as being something like a grave, which excluded reality and time. By virtue of spurning those connections which exist as links running in every which way among artworks, ideas and people, the space became a *non-place*, an ideal and Platonic space where everything could be excluded except the stable frame. What resulted was brought forth as that era's culminative and consummatory work of art: white, neutral, cubic, hygienic, hermetic and exclusive. However, writes O'Doherty, this actually proved to be something of a utopian project: gaining a glimpse of eternity cost us our humanity.

¹ O'Doherty, B. (1976). *Inside the White Cube: The ideology of the gallery space*. Santa Monica, CA: The Lapis Press.

And what emerged was a social elitism, which did not manage to pose any questions to the system through which it presented itself. Quite certainly, modernism revolutionized perception, but perception's politics remains an unwritten page, he concludes.

Modernism's white cube regarded the individual human being – the subject – as something firmly defined and universal, as a calculable entity that obeys general laws. We are still familiar with this when we consider the case of large-scale urban planning strategies, where differences are to this day often perceived as a problem. Or from consumer concentrations, where there is no receptivity whatsoever to actions or experiences other than precisely those that have been prescribed beforehand. In this perspective, spatiality is something external to oneself and something that is primarily mediated through the eye. The American philosopher John Rajchman has described this as an 'optical Puritanism', where the eye – in reality – is abstracted from every connection with the body's other organs, with the result that the eye comes to be purely formal and abstract. Concomitantly, space and time come to be uniform and continuous. The sense of sight had become (and still remains) such a predominant sensory faculty and had become coupled with the intellect to such a marked degree that all that was blurred and obscure was even categorized as erroneous. When, for example, there was any mention of a passage between interior and exterior, what was implicitly understood was the gaze's passage². Here, what could be employed as an image was the 'visual model': the *camera obscura*, a contrivance that was developed in the seventeenth century – and subsequently evolved into the modern camera – a device that builds upon the utterly simple principle that the light from without is conveyed into a darkened space through a narrow aperture, with the consequence that the external world is reflected as an image. As a figure, it frames a viewer, who is free and sovereign, and simultaneously isolated and closed inside a private space, separated from the external world. This appears to be a model of how observation can be regarded as a truthful and objective statement about the world while at the same time – and precisely because of the fact that – it subordinates all individual sensory experiences in relation to the external world 'on the other side'³.

² Rajchman, J. (1998). *Constructions* (Writing Architecture Series), (pp. 57-58). Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.

³ Among others, the American art historian Jonathan Crary has written about the *camera obscura* as a model for how the human being sees herself as separated or distanced from the world around her. See, for

Space as unfolding, human being as interchange

And precisely because the sense of sight has for such a long time played a role as the deciding sense faculty, it has been possible to sustain a clear dividing line between the ‘disclosing-objective’ and the ‘constructing-subjective’. If one, on the other hand, dares to entertain the notion that the sight is merely one among several sensory faculties, such a dividing line can actually be characterized as an optical illusion. Our perception – which means to say, the sensory experience of the world – can be so culturally coded and so ‘cultivated’ by influences from the surroundings that we sometimes forget to notice the cultivation, that we do not remain fully aware of it and accordingly descend into conferring universal values onto the outside world.

Following this line of thought, one could choose to arrange a perspective which does not regard space as something objectively ‘out there’ or as something static and clearly defined that she can just leave behind and which will remain intact and unaffected when she happens to re-enter. Instead, one might imagine that the space is unfolding and that it is defined through movement, action and genesis. As material culture, space is not unmovable and not something that can be measured geometrically, but rather something that can be utterly dense and dialectically bound up with social, cultural, psychological, behavioral and consciousness-related aspects. And it can accordingly be just as unsettled and changeable. In this way, space is not apprehended merely as *a* form, but as the mode according to which *the* form (and its content) in relation with the individual human being (and her culture) can exert influence on this person’s experience of her environment.

What bearing can this have on the conception of the individual subject? One can choose – as does the French anthropologist Bruno Latour - to regard the subject as relational, as something that necessarily exists within the continual interchange, as a fleeting and transient entity, which is always mediated, always distributed. For Latour, existence is always without essence, because the conception about essences, as he writes, is rooted in a scraping away of the relations within which the existence makes its appearance. For this reason, he also dismisses the traditional differentiation between,

example: Crary, J. (1988). *Modernizing Vision*, in H. Foster (ed.), *Vision and Visuality* (pp.29-44). New York: Dia Art Foundation,

on the one side, the acting subject and, on the other, the passive object (or space): It is not only objects or spaces that are formed by subjects; subjects are also formed by objects and spaces and the creative moment first comes into being by acknowledging such a dissimilarity and such a dissemination. Latour speaks about ‘currents under steady influences’⁴. One can also, in the manner of the French philosopher Gilles Deleuze, choose to regard the subject as something that is always coming into being: modernity is precisely that process which constantly turns us into indefinable subjects, who do not fit into fixed categories, Deleuze writes. The result of this is also that we can be shaped through habits and traditions, through historic constructions; this can, on the one hand, have a disheartening effect, since it can paralyze the will, and, on the other hand, it can come as a refreshing opportunity, inasmuch as we – if we make ourselves conscious about this process – have the opportunity to participate in determining the influence. Deleuze’s ideas can be regarded as expressions of an implicit reliance on life, since, as he writes, before we become *somebody* we have the potential to be *anybody*. There is nothing that is constituted beforehand – not within the individual person, that is to say, only in the milieu into which she enters. Life is not merely a possibility; it is a chance, as he writes⁵.

If one chooses to follow the logic of such notions, what is similarly implied is an understanding about life as a flowing stream of constant cultural translations, by means of which reality, as it can be experienced, must also be in motion all the time: we engage ourselves senso-motorically with the world by moving about, by touching, by breathing and by eating. And we thus play a role in bringing it forth into being through our concrete actions. And we simultaneously contribute to the surrounding environment’s physiognomies by constructing people’s perception of reality. It might be said that experience is not something that transpires in time and space, because this merely illustrates a conception of time and space as hollow, neutral boxes which are not connected in any way with their changing contents.

⁴ He does so in, among other works: *We Have Never Been Modern*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993 and in: Om aktør-netværksteori: Nogle få afklaringer og mere end nogle få forviklinger, in *Philosophia*, 25(3-4), pp. 47-64.

⁵ See, for example: Deleuze, G. & Guattari, F. (1987). *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and schizophrenia*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press. Similarly: Deleuze, G. (1997), *Immanence: A Life Theory, Culture and Society*, 14 (2), pp. 3-7.

Experience is, rather, one of time and space, because it is completely entangled up and connected with the specific spatial and temporal relations within which it happens to take place.

Faulty mechanical displacements

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the Frenchman Henri Bergson authored a number of interesting passages about our - often habitually prescribed or mechanical – relationship to time and space. These passages were written especially as part of a critique of modern science’s attempts to categorize everything, even movement’s time and space. It was Bergson’s position that in its quest to categorize mobility, modern science placed inordinate emphasis on mobility’s invariability. What he wanted to demonstrate instead was how phenomena’s fluctuations are contingent upon time’s nature – and not time as mechanical and homogenous and as something that can be divided up in distinct and mutually successive intervals, but rather time as an internal, heterogeneous elapse, without sequential order and without being divisible or enumerable⁶.

On account of our tendency to categorize, we always end up carrying out certain faulty displacements, Bergson pointed out. One of these, for example, is that, when we concern ourselves with phenomena of different quality, we come to treat them as if they were merely of different quantity. This is revealed, for instance, in our frequent use of words like ‘less’, ‘larger’ and ‘more’ when we try to describe conditions of different kinds. For example, when we illuminate a white wall with a lamp and immediately increase the luminous intensity, most people would instinctively describe the change as a shift in the perception of the intensity and not in the perception of the wall’s color, which is what we actually see. Bergson calls this a representative sensation or an ‘acquired perception’, since we are merely explaining the effect by interjecting the cause.

Another displacement which Bergson sets into relief touches upon the relationship between time and space: what he illuminates is that when we perceive time in terms of parts which, when assembled, constitute a unity, what actually transpires is a

⁶ This rather brief introduction to Bergson’s thoughts about **displacements** is based on: Bergson, H. (1911/1998). *Creative Evolution*. Mineola, NY: Dover. Also on: Bergson, H. (1917/1980). *Det umiddelbare i bevidstheden: En studie over det umiddelbart givne i de sjælelige virksomheder og tilstande*. Copenhagen: Vintens Forlag. (The edition from 1917 was entitled *Den rene bevidsthed*).

spatialization of time, inasmuch as space is turned into that material within which our consciousness assigns place for the fluctuation. It can be said that we are unfurling time out into space or that we are conjoining time to space. However, as Bergson points out, it is only for us that the time-interval exists: outside ourselves there would only be space. Consequently, space can, after all, only be simultaneous, because whenever we speak about direction, movement and extension, we have started off by separating the segments from each other and subsequently collated the places they occupy: that which we call 'before' and 'after' actually exist simultaneously, side by side. A single movement, for example, consists of two differentiable elements: the traversed space and the act whereby one traverses it. The former is a homogeneous quantity; the latter is only real to the consciousness and is a quality. But we confound the phenomena, Bergson writes, because when we say that we are measuring a movement, it has nothing to do with the elapse of time, but has to do instead with space and its infinite divisibility into simultaneities.

Comprehending time as a line along which one can conceive of moving forward and backward is an illusion, since the duration – which is what he actually calls the interior course of time – does not elapse *in* time, but *is* time itself. The duration cannot be subdivided without concomitantly being qualitatively altered. It stands out clearly to us in its immediacy and only in its discontinuous and stratified multiplicity can it be apprehended via intuition. Bergson describes this as a reciprocal interpenetration of qualitative alterations: they coalesce, merging into one another in organic connections and possess no fixed contours.

However, Bergson calls our attention to the fact that the steadily increasing spatialization of phenomena is in a certain way inevitable, because it is a part of the act of reflection itself. And at the same time, it is also a link in a natural socialization process because it provides us with the opportunity to refer to the same objects and phenomena and to make use of the same designations, and so forth. It is not here that the problem lies – we are bound to operate with an 'objective' common world. The problem arises, on the other hand, when we – through thinking in habitual patterns - come to confound the one with the other: that is to say, when we are lured into transferring the external world's object status onto the interior, with the result that the exterior world becomes the authority according to which the interior is evaluated. We then allow the exterior

authority to reign and forget that we, in our own way, have ourselves created it as exterior.

Space, concludes Bergson, is not the ordered, constant and static, but rather the elastic and emergent, and it possesses varying concentrations of intensity: our movements are not in space; space is actualized and unfolded *by virtue of* our movement, by virtue of the substance. With this, a serious blow is dealt to the customary interpretation of space's existence as being independent of its content, as a neutral container or initial condition.

Finally, Bergson also calls attention to the intimate connection between memory and perception, which can once again cause us to lapse into a web of confusion: According to him, memory is a prerequisite for perception, because every perception is fused together with and is permeated with what the body and the consciousness remember. What is central here is to acknowledge and confirm the memory's presence, so that we can avoid conflating perception and recognition, which is tantamount to saying, we should not fall into believing that we experience via the senses, when we actually experience via language and (memory-) images alone. In doing so, we would merely be boiling down variances in quality to variances in quantity.

Tools

The purpose of setting forth a concise description of a few lines in Bergson's formulations about time and in the present day's critique of modernism's intermittent control and regimentation of individual experience is envisioned here as a sketch toward certain tools and concepts that can be employed, as the case may arise in the present day, for speaking about spatial experiences.

The tools all express an interest in how to conduct ourselves in relation to spatial phenomena without the displacements that supervene, often unconsciously, when we have to evaluate our own experiences. They similarly articulate an acknowledgement that it is impossible to distinguish between the world as it is for the individual human being and the world as it is in itself: it is not the case that one can make his way toward a phenomenon through the individual person and her experience, but rather that each and

every phenomenon can inevitably *only* be a phenomenon for somebody⁷. Finally, the tools can therefore also be understood as a way of acknowledging and giving voice to variations in experience.

The critique refers to the spatial disciplining that sometimes transpires, and also to the widespread aspiration toward the ‘virgin’ space, the white cube, which is regarded as neutral, autonomous, ideal and exclusive. The critique also revolves around the sense of sight’s dominance, the gaze as the mediator of the truthful and ‘objective’, and around our blindness to our sight’s and our other senses’ sustained cultivation; similarly it touches upon the conceptions about a universal subject. Bergson’s critique was dealing with a series of displacements which we, according to him, come again and again to carry out between time and space, between movement and the physical space within which it takes place, between perception and recognition, between cause and effect, and also between the exterior world’s object status and the interior, before which it appears.

What is thrown into relief instead is the conception that space is unfolded and that it is defined through movement. There is a focusing on a subject, which is in constant movement and always on the way to something else, always in the process of changing into something else in the constant meeting and the inevitable interchange with the surrounding environment. As has been mentioned, Bergson employed the words ‘simultaneous’, ‘elastic’ and ‘emergent’ when speaking about space and he was of the opinion that it can be experienced in the manner of possessing different concentrations of intensity. For him, time was not an ‘external’ phenomenon but rather a heterogeneous internal elapse – a duration – which cannot be divided up into segments in the manner that we often attempt, but rather an elapse which in its discontinuous form can – on the contrary - *only* be apprehended through intuition.

A fictive tour

How can these tools be employed, then, for giving voice to Olafur Eliasson’s installations? Let’s try to imagine that we are moving past a few of the works at the exhibition:

⁷ And, obviously, this is way of thinking that is much akin to the phenomenological approach, as we find in the works of philosophers like Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Edmund Husserl.

The entrance has been formed in the manner of a long corridor which is enveloped in a yellowish light. The yellowish light is a mono-frequency hue, which means to say that it consists of but one single wavelength of light, situated in the yellow region of the spectrum. On this account, all other colors in the corridor are invisible to our eyesight. Our clothing becomes devoid of color, our faces appear pallid, and it seems we moved over into a black-and-white world. As a matter of fact, everything seems to be crystal clear, because the eye has much less information to work with than is normally the case, with the result that the sense of sight comes to be *sharpened*, as it were. However, this is a condition which will change in the course of a few minutes: the eye is so very accustomed to white light, with its full-color spectrum, that it very rapidly sends – through its nerve pathway transmissions – messages to the brain to produce that which is missing, which means to say the other basic colors: red and blue: and therefore purple. In the instant that we enter, everything appears bathed in an intensely yellowish light, but the eye compensates for the imbalance and generates a surplus of purple, so that the space becomes ‘normalized’, as it were. This is also why – when we enter into the mirror-room, the exhibition’s next room – everything appears at first to be standing with the tinge a blue-purple glimmer. The yellow corridor exerts an influence on our eyes and on our neurological condition, and we carry the effects of this along with us into the experience of the succeeding space. The experience comes to be both a reaction to and a construction of the new surroundings. What each person sees, exactly, and actually experiences cannot be mapped out as anything other than something that situates itself someplace among the virtually infinite degrees of hue in the field situated between the two complementary poles of yellow and purple.

At the end of the yellow corridor, you can find in a cubicle a *camera obscura*, which reflects the next of the exhibition’s spaces: the mirror room. It is actually difficult *not* to perceive the reflection as a truthful image: we stand there, apparently alone and untouched in the dark – without any disturbing sounds or scents – and observe a completely photographic reproduction of an adjoining space, the external world, the world outside ourselves. The only thing that disturbs this ‘objective’ statement is the fact that the reflected space is furnished with mirrors that cover the entire ceiling.

Consequently, the space appears to be doubled or, as it were, turned upside down. In themselves, the mirrors cannot be seen in the reflection – the image does not ‘explain’ itself – only the doubling, which disturbs the statement in its capacity as a true picture. Instead, there is merely an image which can deceive the sense of sight, in much the same way that every one of the senses can be deceived and manipulated. In other words, we become conscious that the sensory operations and the sense perceptions are constructed, although raising awareness does not have so much to do with ‘unveiling another - and truer - world ‘lying behind’’. What it might actually involve, to put it more precisely, is that in doing so, we are adding yet another layer onto or co-producing the world. This process can never become transparent since the gaze also possesses significance, the gaze is also constitutive of reality.

As we move further along in the exhibition, we enter into a darkened room, which is at the same time a moist space, possessing an atmosphere of humidity. Falling from above, there is a delicate carpet of drizzling rain – a hose has been led up into the ceiling – while a lamp, also situated above, illuminates the water. Here, the experience involves seeing a rainbow, a phenomenon we know well from driving around in the landscape, from looking at pictures and watching movies. It might take some time before we discover the rainbow, since to put it mildly, it seems here to be removed from its ordinary context – that is to say, as a fixed picture in the setting of a beautiful landscape. These difficulties are compounded by the fact that any step taken in another direction will entail that the rainbow ‘vanishes’. A rainbow is nothing other than a phenomenon for the eye and a product of a certain angle between the eye, the light and the drops of water, with the consequence that as soon as we move, it is the angle that is changed, and not the rainbow, as we might otherwise be prompted into believing as we pass its splendor situated somewhere over there, far off in the landscape. The experience of the rainbow here demonstrates ever so distinctly how our body is not merely a line of demarcation or a screen between the subject and the surrounding environment, but is rather the very way in which the subject exists in the world: the subject and the world are not two entities that can be assembled and separated *ad libitum*, as though they were two Lego blocks. No, the subject can only be conceived and understood as being world-related and the surrounding environment only makes sense to the extent that it shows itself before the subject. It can

be said that the body is our hold on the world; this is a point that is often overlooked, because we generally tend to remember our body's previous experiences. A perception is an admixture of new experience and recognition. But sometimes we can come to be so familiar with the picture that it 'takes over' the apprehension of the overall experience. Whenever we see a rainbow, we can accordingly exhibit a tendency to see all the rainbows we know from other situational contexts and which refer to our culture's definition of the beautiful, the paradisiacal, the peaceful, the magical and so on. With the rainbow here before us, on the other hand, we quickly become cognizant that the representation cannot compensate: here, the bodily hold on the experience is so pronounced that we are quickly compelled to think about the extent to which phenomena are always phenomena for somebody in a particular situational context.

The various installations do not merely constitute one single successive sequence, where the one phenomenon follows after the other, in the manner of pearls on a string; as Bergson was suggesting, it might be interesting to distinguish between the movement and the space within which the movement transpires. In space, we move from one point to the next, while the movement itself shapes itself as a constant interchange and transformation, because the condition always changes in character in new situations which are once again transformed in the meeting with this installation and the next one, and so on and so forth. And it is this account that one can maintain that the space can suddenly be experienced as possessing varying concentrations of intensity. In the preceding little fictive walking tour through a few of the installations, we moved our way through a spatial elapse where we first saw in an ultra-sharp way and where we, immediately afterward, participated in producing a purple gleam which arose wherever we turned our gaze and where we also, mentally, came to be just a bit affected by the light's unusual operation. After this, the body's center of balance was affected by the room's doubling, and soon thereafter, this was counteracted by our encounter with the dark cubicle, with its high degree of humidity, which can only be felt and not seen. At the same time, we had the opportunity to experience a marked displacement of the spatial zones that we know so very well, such as foreground in relation to background or the delimited subject who perceives the delimited object, which can be perceived at any time from any position whatsoever – a displacement that makes it difficult to determine with

distinct clarity where the artwork terminates, and where the space and we ourselves begin.

The expiration can accordingly be mapped out as a series of phenomena which, in a material sense, have something to do with light, water, mirrors and so forth, but which in their spatial dialogue with the individual human being cause the movement to turn into something that unfolds itself as an interior and occasionally discontinuous temporal elapse. Making use of the image previously employed, it is not possible to say anything other than that the experience situates itself someplace between yellow and purple; henceforth there are an infinite number of variations in the experience.

The constant cultivation of the senses

The act of reflecting over the many different kinds of displacements that can take place does not have to do with creating jumping-off points for experiences that suddenly offer insight into ‘the things’ correct context’; it must rather be regarded as an extension of an understanding that our senses can no longer merely be perceived as neutral tools for gaining access to reality in its objectivity but rather as reality-produced and reality-producing registers, which with their incessant and shimmering changes are always taking inventory. And accordingly, this can also be regarded as one of the incentives for the fact that many artists of the present day are interested in exploring and rendering problematic our senses’ constant and sweeping cultivation. Even art museums, with their traditional presentations and contemporary contexts are not objective but are rather manifestations of a particular manner of staging (that is to say, curating, whether this be conscious or unconscious), a particular cultivation of the eye’s sight, according to a scrupulous agenda.

With the same hold, this could also revolve around establishing a specific gesture addressed to the individual subject – not some delineated subject or imagined subject (that which is defined from without, the stereotype, the ‘average’ person), but the individual that is factually moving around inside the artwork in question. And we’re not talking here about the subject’s ‘concealed sincerity’ but rather the subject as positioned in the world, as Latour’s ‘currents under steady influences’ or Deleuze’s ‘becoming

anybody'. This is an expression of a view that there is no 'inner' that exists – isolated all by itself; there is *only* the subject-world-relation.

One might ask, then, what's so important about all this interest in creating room for the experience of the individual subject? The answer might be connected with the circumstance that since our relationship to the world is so underlying, so fundamental and so obvious, we ordinarily do not even give it a thought – we move around it, circumventing it with inadvertent reliance, so to speak. Consequently, it can sometimes be necessary, albeit difficult, to address oneself critically to the reliance, which means to say, to render problematic the psychic, social, conceptual and other dissonance, which arises every now and then between what we see and how we see it. This can be perceived as a resistance in the face of institutions' normalizing and regimenting tendency, a resistance to the institutional conferment of value, which sanctions the work on the basis of a supposition about inherent qualities, not qualities that might issue from the relation between subject and work. In a wider perspective, this subject-world-relation can be regarded as a kind of counter-commentary to an everyday reality where we - in a misleading fashion – are crammed with the idea about freedom and individualism but are nonetheless seldom granted any latitude for reflexivity and critique. This does not entail, however, that the individual can situate him/herself outside the discursive hierarchy of meaning. However, there is still a sense of confidence that the individual is in possession of the agency that is seated in being able to analyze and, when the occasion arises, criticize such a hierarchy. According to this optics, it's not a matter of discovering that which is true and real as such but rather a matter of pondering the notion that through the vehicle of constant displacements and dissonances, new forms of truth and reality are always going to be produced.

Marianne Krogh Jensen is mag.art. and Ph.D.

translated by DAN A. MARMORSTEIN