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YOUR ENGAGEMENT HAS CONSEQUENCES

Olafur Eliasson

'Physics has found no straight lines – has found only waves – physics has found no solids – only high-frequency event fields. THE UNIVERSE IS NOT CONFORMING TO A THREE-DIMENSIONAL PERPENDICULAR-PARALLEL FRAME OF REFERENCE. The universe of physical energy is always divergently expanding (radiantly) or convergently contracting (gravitationally).'
 Richard Buckminster Fuller

Everything is situated within a process – everything is in motion. This not only applies to comprehensive systems like entire societies or the development of an international search engine on the internet, but also to our perception of a given space, here and now, and to our interaction with other people. All these relationships are evolving and they are not merely situated in the midst of their time; rather, they are of time.

Despite this, contemporary culture has a tendency to objectify a vast quantity of systems, relations, situations and ideas by depriving them of their temporal dimension. As a result, we have grown accustomed to regarding objects as timeless and our conception of space has been formalised. The entertainment industry, especially, has developed a strategy of communication that consciously omits the notion of temporality, since this makes it easier to set up universal utopias and desires for consumers. The separation of time and objects is thus to a large degree driven by commercial aims.

In this short essay, I hope to reintroduce awareness of time as a constituent element of objects and our surroundings through two small case studies. The first traces the relation between an idea and time, whereas the other explores vibrations as a language with which to describe space. By focusing on time and vibrations, we can create a perspective – a construction, of course – from which an alternative spatial conception springs.

Let us look at the reintroduction of time into matter through a small model I have made for the occasion:

1. Idea:

An idea or concept is processual.

2. Application of Form to the Idea:

In order to communicate the idea, I have to find a language for it. In this way, content finds a form and – in order to keep this experiment simple – we can state that the form becomes the 'carrier' of the content (although the relationship between content and form is in reality much more complex).

3. Communication of the Idea:

The form applied to an idea is not only the one that I myself choose. When circulated, every idea picks up dimensions and meaning that I haven't considered and couldn't foresee –

regardless of whether they are productive to my original thought or not. Forms are therefore temporal, caught up in the tissue of exchange, constantly coloured by the ongoing negotiations and renegotiations with their surroundings, and time adds relativity to the idea as it travels through the world. Unfortunately the global commodification of both forms and our senses considers the idea of a relative or malleable object to be counterproductive to the core of capitalistic value systems.

4. Time is Individual:

The clock is not our only tool for the measurement of time. It seems more attractive to talk about your time and my time; that is, the lived experience of time, instead of being concerned with the universal construction of temporality that so many people take for granted. What is fast to me may appear slow to you. It is not only our immediate experiences that are a subjective matter; our memories and expectations also have a highly individual impact on our perceptions.

5. Your Engagement Sequence (YES):

The relativity that temporal engagement inevitably introduces should, for scientific laboratory purposes, be given a name: I suggest 'YES' (Your Engagement Sequence). YES attunes our attention to time, movement and changeability. It makes relative what is often considered to be true. Whenever a so-called truthful statement is made, you have to add YES in order to relate to, see through and make use of the statement. By regarding YES as a central element of our perceptions, you can negotiate the governing dogma of timelessness and static objecthood, thus emphasising your responsibility for the configuration of the concrete situation.

6. Consequences:

If an idea only exists as a process, the traditional definition of truth and non-truth is shattered. And when objects are relative to various factors such as context and engagement, even basic communication seems to become a challenge, especially because the language in which we usually speak and write is promoted by communication trends within modern society that do not favour such relativities. If we accept and implement the relativity of so-called truth by using YES, a general sense of responsibility in our relationship to our surroundings may be achieved. In other words, engagement has consequences and these entail a heightened feeling of responsibility.

This is but a model. And with it I merely wish to suggest a few schematic principles that may illustrate the general idea that experience is a cultural construction.

Not only time has been formalised in contemporary life; space, too – fundamentally inseparable from time – has been made stable. Influenced by an essentially modernistic point of view, we have – consciously or not – conceived causal relationships between the right kind of space and the good life as such. Even after the end of postmodernism, we still find modern dogmas dominating our conception of space.

On the other hand, if people are given tools and made to understand the importance of a fundamentally flexible space, we can create a more democratic way of orienting ourselves in our everyday lives. We could call our relationship with space one of co-production: when someone walks down a street she co-produces the spatiality of the street and is simultaneously co-produced by it.

This brings us beyond the classical Euclidean conception of space, consisting of three dimensions: height, length and depth, which define the object's relation to each. From this system, another conception of space has developed, the theory of topology, in which the temporal aspect of objects and spaces is central. Time is here traditionally referred to as the fourth dimension. Where the classical system was one of coordinates in a clearly defined field, topology sees objects moving over time, thus adding duration to height, length and depth.

Topological objects or figures are never static. And to continue the small experiment above, I would suggest that we introduce yet another component – another dimension: the objective categories are connected to the life of the individual subject through his or her engagement in the situation – YES. The fifth dimension is only possible when the fourth dimension is present; without temporality the idea of engagement does not make sense. YES creates a personal perspective on the world; it individualises the other dimensions of space. I am interested in the potential inherent in giving the individual subject this dimensionality as a sort of tool that can relativise the other dimensions upon which our conception of space is based.

YES is only one tool with which to create alternatives to the modernistic conception of space. Another is waves. These can be waves of information, but also the communication of information through physical waves such as microwaves, long waves and frequency. Electricity is a kind of wave, as are my words, when they leave my mouth as condensed air, spreading radiantly, entering your ears. Also light, absorbed by our eyes, is usually perceived as waves.

At my studio, I have, together with a group of architects, developed a system of three swinging pendulums that cause a measurable small point – the sum of the combined movements of the pendulums – to move in three dimensions. This vibration machine is a spatial development of what is traditionally called a harmonograph, which exists in various versions. They are almost always two-dimensional; i.e. have two pendulums only. By linking each pendulum to a digital interface I can ascribe to them the coordinates of x, y and z, and then digitally draw the spatial result of the three frequencies. They are easily tuned to a C major chord, for instance, one pendulum sounding the note C, one E, and one G. If they are given the correct frequency, the chord is harmonious and the vibrations form an orderly whole. This solidifies over time, thus drawing the contours of a three-dimensional object in space. In other words: sound vibrations can be turned into a tangible object. It is almost like building a model. One could develop this experiment into vast spatial arrangements by turning harmonious chords into spatial shapes. If we were to use a whole concert, like Beethoven's Fifth Symphony, we might build an entire city.

My interest in creating spatio-temporal forms based solely on vibrations and measured by my three-dimensional harmonograph is not so much the mathematical, computational specificities of the machine as the possibility of inscribing the understandings derived from the experiment into a wider, spatial context. And as is clear, architecture consists of other material than stones, concrete and steel. Music and sound also have consequences for our experience of space; in fact, they are co-constitutive, shaping our environments in a quite literal way. As with my initial case study, the vibration machine should only be seen as a model; a medium through which we can make non-negotiable spatial situations more negotiable. By considering various kinds of waves, you can ascribe different dimensions to a space in constant transformation.

The fields of waves are connected to my fundamental interest in exploring the relationship that arises between visitor and artwork. The experience of space – walking down the street, for instance – is a negotiation in which a co-creation takes place. What I am aiming at is to try to isolate the negotiation or engagement; that is, neither looking at the person nor the street, but instead at the in-between. The three-dimensional images created by my harmonograph are one such basic attempt.

Finally, you may ask what role art plays in this extended discussion of time and space. To put it simply, I am interested in enhancing the role of art as a participant in society and find that art can contribute with reflections of a spatial nature; it can have political, social and aesthetic impact in non-artistic practices as well.

The potential of art is made apparent by the self-reflexive activities of the people engaging actively with it. Ultimately, art can raise fundamental questions about the development of our

feeling of selfhood and identity. My interest lies not in the emphasis of a specific identity, but rather in the conditions that allow for the formulation of identity as an open field, characterised by a multiplicity of voices. The value system suggested by society at large unfortunately tends to favour fixed identities and few voices, based on limited concepts of what is good and bad, acceptable and non-acceptable. Facing the entertainment industry's commodification of experience by excluding relativity through the suspension of time, the questions about self-reflection and identity have to be seriously reconsidered. We should avoid what we might call a Disneyfication of experience in order to leave room for individual evaluation, feelings and thoughts. When preserving the freedom of each person to experience something that may differ from the experiences of others, art will be able to have a significant impact on both the individual and on society.