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Article:

Curtis, Francesca (2019) Exhibition Review: Climate Change for the Experience Economy 'Olafur Eliasson: In Real Life', 11 July 2019 - 5 January 2020. *Aspectus* (1). pp. 1-3. ISSN: 2732-561X

<https://doi.org/10.15124/yao-hj5xwk75>

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ASPECTUS

A Journal of Visual Culture

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*Review: Climate Change for the Experience Economy
'Olafur Eliasson: In Real Life'*

Issue 1 - 2019

ISSN 2732-561X

pp. 1-3

University of York

Published: 2 October 2019



Climate Change for the Experience Economy ‘*Olafur Eliasson: In Real Life*’

11 July 2019 - 5 January 2020

FRANCESCA CURTIS

Olafur Eliasson: In Real Life may be the most Instagrammable exhibition currently on view in the United Kingdom. Upon entry to the second floor of Tate Modern’s Blavatnik building, visitors are presented with a map detailing a route for over forty works by Olafur Eliasson, providing multiple opportunities for interaction. They can stand under a rainbow-coloured rain shower in *Beauty* (1993), battle through fog in *Din Blinde Passager* (2010), and interrogate their own shadow broken into a spectrum of colour in *Your Uncertain Shadow (colour)* (2010). Far from the mere exhibition of objects, Eliasson provides interactive phenomena that are fun for the whole family.

This first major UK retrospective of Eliasson’s work also has an environmentalist agenda. Tate’s press release states that *In Real Life* “brings to our attention some of today’s most urgent issues” and curators Mark Godfrey and Emma Lewis encompass Eliasson’s aim to use embodied experience to investigate how humanity relates to the natural world.¹ The exhibition follows two previous collaborations with Tate Modern: the renowned *The Weather Project* (2003) installation in the Turbine Hall, and *Ice Watch* London (2018), installed outside Tate Modern and other London locations. While the former epitomises how the artist manipulates atmospheric conditions to alter social interaction, the latter incorporates Eliasson’s explicit engagement with climate change. Working with geologist Minik Rosing, Eliasson transported thirty blocks of ice that had broken from the ice sheets of Greenland’s Nuup Kangerlua fjord, calling attention to the alarming rate at which these blocks are falling. He told *The Guardian*: “It turns out that data alone only promotes a small degree of change. So in order to create the massive behavioural change needed [to tackle climate change] we have to emotionalise that data, make it physically tangible”.²

The Expanded Studio, the last room of *In Real Life*, encompasses this environmentalism. Along with documentation on the artist’s activist projects, *Little Sun* (2012) and *Green Light – An Artistic Workshop* (2017), the room’s focal point is a wall length pin board detailing the artist’s research. Grouped in themes such as atmosphere, sustainability, affect, and embodiment, Eliasson juxtaposes recent newspaper articles and texts by scholars such as Bruno Latour, Donna Haraway, Timothy Morton, and Elizabeth Povinelli, with artworks by Amy Balkin and Ed Burtynsky. This comprehensive insight into the artist’s thinking intends to shed light on the artworks experienced prior to this point and to reinforce the fact that this awe-inspiring experience has ramifications in the era of the Anthropocene.



Olafur Eliasson, Beauty, 1993, spotlight, water, nozzles, wood, hose, pump, dimensions variable. Installation view at Moderna Museet, Stockholm, 2015. Photo: Anders Sune Berg. Courtesy of the artist; neugerriemschneider, Berlin; Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York / Los Angeles. © 1993 Olafur Eliasson.

Eliasson's preoccupation with affect can be witnessed in the mesmerised reaction of children to artworks like *Beauty* (1993) and *Big Bang Fountain* (2014). The emphasis on the sensorial, moving from the purely visual to embodied experience, makes *In Real Life* fitting for a childlike, but not juvenile, experience. But this playground methodology also operates on a pre-personal level that is ecocentric in orientation. It evokes Brian Massumi's affect theory, in which he defines affect as an "intensity" that takes place at the interface between relating components.³ To be affected by an artwork in this way does not require reason; rather, it prompts an ontological investigation into how humans as material bodies interact with the non-human world. Eliasson thus has the potential to realign how the participant perceives their relationship to the environment. The extent to which theory translates into reality, however, is a different matter entirely. When Eliasson places emphasis on the participant completing the artwork, not only does it anthropocentrically imply that humanity completes the world, it allows a large proportion of visitors to capitalise on the ample photo opportunities as the artwork and themselves merge. In short, it becomes a spectacle.

There is something uncomfortable about the exhibition's emphasis on first-hand experience while maintaining an environmental stance. Although a concern for emissions is evidenced in Eliasson's organic, vegetarian menu commissioned for the gallery's Terrace Bar (it produces fifty-two percent less carbon dioxide than the average home-cooked meal), the emissions produced by the international audience, drawn in by the desire to experience rather than just view an image of the installation, remain unknown. This is an issue that transcends *In Real Life* and is symptomatic of any environmentally-oriented global art exhibition. *In Real Life* is part of what Simon Sheikh has termed the "experience economy": in

contemporary art practice, the experience of the exhibition and its location are equally as commodifiable as objects.⁴

Significantly, Tate Modern not only capitalises through footfall. In July, a week after the opening of *In Real Life*, the directors of Tate declared climate emergency, committing to green energy and reducing its carbon emissions by at least ten percent by 2023.⁵ This comes after increased pressure by the collective Liberate Tate who critiqued the institution's sponsorship by British Petroleum (BP). While Tate ended this contract in 2017, *In Real Life's* environmental emphasis operates as a marketing campaign for an institution seeking to rebrand itself after years of criticism.

Visitors may be forgiven if climate change is not at the centre of their attention as they negotiate the fairground that is *In Real Life*. While the environmentalist intentions of Eliasson are certainly sincere and evidenced in *The Expanded Studio*, much of the artist's underlying environmental politics are lost in translation. The displayed feedback comments, ranging from "so much fun" to "and the point was...?", clarify that for many the experience is nothing but pleasurable. It is frustrating that an exhibition associated with such an important subject lacks urgency. Rather, it provides Tate with the opportunity to express a comfortable level of concern without endangering itself with anything radical, challenging, or subversive.

Olafur Eliasson: *In Real Life* is on display at the Tate Modern from 11 July 2019 to 5 January 2020. Curated by Mark Godfrey and Emma Lewis.

¹ "Olafur Eliasson: *In Real Life*." *Tate*. July 9, 2019. <https://www.tate.org.uk/press/press-releases/olafur-eliasson-real-life-0>.

² Tim Jonze, "Icebergs Ahead! Olafur Eliasson brings the frozen fjord to Britain," *The Guardian*, December 11, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2018/dec/11/icebergs-ahead-olafur-eliasson-brings-the-frozen-fjord-to-britain-ice-watch-london-climate-change>.

³ Brian Massumi, "The Autonomy of Affect," *Cultural Critique*, no. 31 (1995): 85-96.

⁴ Simon Sheikh, "Marks of Distinction, Vectors of Possibility: Questions for the Biennial," *Open: Cahier on Art and the Public Domain*, no. 16 (2009): 70.

⁵ "Press Release: Tate Directors declare climate emergency," *Tate*, July 17, 2019, <https://www.tate.org.uk/press/press-releases/tate-directors-declare-climate-emergency>.