

# Spaces of Participation and Memory in the Work of Olafur Eliasson and Janet Cardiff

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**Abstract** This paper examines the reception of contemporary art through temporality, spatiality, participation and memory of artistic production in the works of artists Olafur Eliasson and Janet Cardiff. The problem of understanding contemporaneity in the work of art is based precisely on that collision of space and time, which are altered due to their contexts and their procedural practices. We will analyse installation art of Olafur Eliasson that extend spatial-temporal perceptual limits interrogating the viewer. And we will also analyse the spatio-temporal anachronisms of Janet Cardiff's artistic interventions.

**Keywords** Participation, Memory, Space-time, Olafur Eliasson, Janet Cardiff

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## 1. Introduction

In the global context, contemporary artistic production has developed its critical processes based on the inclusion and participation of the viewer in the works of art. In some way, the expansion and compression of space-time has been reflected in the characteristics of many artists who base their work on occupying and reinterpreting spaces and times. The present text discusses the spatial and temporal turn that has defined the works of artists such as Olafur Eliasson and Janet Cardiff. Collective and individual memories, spaces of history, politics and culture and even the inclusion of the viewer in the sensory aspects in the works of art of these artists, are signified by the act of spatial and sensitive "drift of the body" of the spectator within a symbolic spatial-temporal relocation.

This is the case of artists like Olafur Eliasson and Janet Cardiff, who although widely referenced have become pioneers of the frequencies of participation and memory in the symbolic space-time order. It is now, within the present time of their work, when it seems more relevant to fix the importance of the processes of symbolic production involved in their work, in order to be able to understand the new space-time displacements, which are currently widely present in contemporary artistic movements.

Therefore, the purpose of this text is to discern the relationships between space-time, abstraction, political and

sensory activation, and the spaces of memory in the artistic works of Olafur Eliasson and Janet Cardiff. However, it should be specified following Keith Moxey (2013) [1] that temporality in the work of art belongs to another register, where the human and chronological time is defined in a predetermined time frame, that it ends up giving way to an immaterial time that exceeds the parameters of chronology.

## 2. Spaces of Participation in Olafur Eliasson

Gaston Bachelard (1994) [2] speaks in *The poetics of space*, about the dialectic of inside and outside and suggests a certain spatialization of thought. Artists such as Robert Irwin, Julio Le Parc, Carlos Cruz-Diez and James Turrell have explored this poetics of space with natural elements such as light. The incorporation in Olafur Eliasson's works of these natural elements such as fog, light, water, ice, lava etc., accentuate the transitions between interior and exterior or culture and nature, thus, blurring the boundaries between natural and artificial. For this, the activation mechanism proposed by the artist is distortion of space through flexibility of the sensory and sensitive, where the sense of time and experience acquire other skills, such as perception, movement, body kinesthesia and configuration of the collective. In short, his work encourages the viewer to experiment with his own senses. This idea of co-presence of the viewer with the work of art refers to the "political" construction of his atmospheres.

For this analysis we will focus on those projects in which light dialogues with the underlying spatiality and temporality. The multisensory experience of his projects with light, brings us closer to questioning possible certainties, as

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Suzanne Pagé (2016) [3] has pointed out: “The constant oscillation between shadow and light, presence and absence, affirmation and doubt it makes us question our visual perceptions and, consequently, our beliefs.” That is why we detect in that questioning of perception the germ of other spatio-temporal variables in which we are interested. For example, the one that takes into account a perceptive exploration that incorporates imagination as a psychosocial element and multisensory experience as forms of a certain collectivity.

These optical illusions generated by the works of Olafur Eliasson allow us to establish a grammar of transformation, where processes become atmospheres. Eliasson says: “The atmospheres are productive, they are active agents. When an atmosphere is introduced into a space, it becomes a reality machine” (Borch, & Böhme, 2014, p. 93) [4].

This occurs in *The Weather Project* (2003-2004), (figure 1), an installation presented at the Tate Modern in London. In it, the representation of a large twilight sun dominates the access room to the exhibition. Eliasson has hung a semicircle of light from the ceiling, now covered with three hundred mirror panels, in such a way that its reflection creates the appearance of a complete circle. And it makes it possible for the ball of light to look as mimetic as the sun. Sodium lamps, generally used in public lighting, emitting light at a frequency so narrow that colours other than yellow and black are invisible, form the semi-circular figure of large dimensions. Likewise, a precarious fog pumped by sixteen nozzles distributed throughout the room soaks the place. Throughout the day, fog accumulates fleetingly in different formations, before dissipating through the exhibition space.



**Figure 1.** Olafur Eliasson, *The Weather Project* (2003-2004). (Source: <http://olafureliasson.net/>)

At the other end of the room, as we begin to walk down the entrance ramp, we become aware of a duplication of space due to a large mirror that covers the entire ceiling, in which

visitors see themselves like tiny black shadows against a blinding orange light. As Eliasson himself states:

We are witnessing a change in the traditional relationship between reality and representation. We no longer evolve from model to reality, but from model to model, while recognizing that, in reality, both models are real. (...) More than considering model and reality as polarized modalities, now they work at the same level. Models have become co-producers of reality. (Eliasson, 2009, p. 11) [5]

But, how do we perceive time in this work? Collective sense of time and space in this work is subject to individual subjectivity. However, Eliasson proposes “sensations as actions” (Eliasson, 2012) [6] and in this way activates a collective sense that produces the environment. Linking the physical into the individual is the one that activates the atmosphere.

In fact, we are facing the use of space as a laboratory where spatio-temporal experience is linked to the problem of identity. And it does so by addressing the “here and now” of the visitor from experimental parameters. Updating the “involvement” of the viewer in the work of art. Somehow, Eliasson proposes the space of the turbine hall of the Tate Modern as a space-time catalyst in the present moment of the viewer, in order to generate an idea of community. Thus, notions of abstraction and politics in his work refer us to a viewer who perceptually experiences the work through his body. And the viewer experiences his body because it establishes sensorial relations with the work. This co-affiliation relation allows to perceived spatio-temporal transformations through a political body.

Christian Borch (Borch & Böhme, 2014) [4] argues quoting Teresa Brennan (2004) [7] that sharing a space sometimes involves transmitting the affective state of the people who inhabit it, through what she calls “dragging processes”, such as, for example, breathing or smell. Likewise, Barbara Maria Stafford (2007) [8] talks about “eco objects” as those that absorb vibrations of their environments and react to them. These arguments are that body is permanently exposed to interaction between politics and environment, where objects, emotional state of people and space atmospheres are mutually implemented. Since space, in itself, can be loaded with emotions that embrace and permeate the bodies that inhabit it. Olafur Eliasson builds his atmospheres to generate a common body from singularity. So, these atmospheres penetrate into the individual, entangling him in the collective and creating some kind of identity. Where an idea of community, of being singular-plural in the words of Nancy (2000) [9] is permanently active. In this way, it is not uncommon to find Eliasson’s eloquent statements that define his exhibitions “as devices”, that must be activated with the viewer’s presence. However, it should be pointed out that this activation is of a political nature, since it is given by what Agamben defines as “the hand-to-hand confrontation with the apparatuses” (2007, p. 72) [10].

This means understanding the processes of co-production as generators of realities and identities that co-exist in the double game of assumption-subjugation. We can observe this process in many of his works. For example, *Dear Everybody, Dear visitors* (2001) explores the potentialities of the visitor's movement in dialogue with Peter Zumthor's building. But, the interesting thing here is that it uses the visitor's movement as a generator of space itself. So, the relation of the visitor is produced with space itself emerging from the visitor's movement.

Eliasson works with colour and its perception as a cognitive element. His early work *Room for one colour* (1997) poses a monochrome space where the visitor perceives himself imbued with a single colour. As Eliasson says: "The colours that visitors produce in their brains overlap, in response, over mine" (Eliasson, 2012, p. 115) [6]. This sharpens the spatio-temporal perception since it increases or restricts, depending on the case, the depth and volume of space or the sensation of spatial bidimensionality. On the other hand, this latent temporality determines our capacity for orientation and activates our subjectivity, which is always temporary. As Eliasson says: "space was given to time. Immediate futures were produced through fragmented images of the past" (Eliasson, 2012, p. 148) [6].

### 3. Janet Cardiff: Memory Spaces

The *audiowalks* works of Janet Cardiff that since 1991 she has been doing is based on the idea of walking as a sculptural piece. Her first tourist guide or *audiowalk* was made in Banff, Canada. This served as a pattern for all others and laid the groundwork for her conception of "space drift", experimenting with audio and visual techniques. Inspired by places where she has made her *audiowalks*, Cardiff points out location, history and time as the main themes when dealing with her "narrative displacements".

In several of her pieces she has used audio and video, as for example in *An Inability to Make a Sound* (1992) or *The Telephone Call* (2001). But basically, it uses general multimedia resources for her space-time walks. Cardiff uses image, sound and film with the intention of questioning our sense of reality, by confronting sounds and pre-recorded images with participation and real performative experimentation of the "here and now" of spectators.

The procedures in her walks respond to a pattern of behaviour and instruction. Participants are given a CD, an instruction book, a headset or a technological device that tells a story or visualizes a journey. *Audiowalks* are a kind of experiment on temporal experience, memory and space, where perception, movement and kinesthesia of the body acquire the rank of artistic work.

Audio-guides function as a spatio-temporal museum guide of a "site" that is signified by its culture or history, where cultural, social and political elements are highlighted. Indications that Cardiff makes with her voice to direct the spectator, such as –turn to the left, turn to the right– are

combined with a mixed narrative of intrigue, with which it is obtained a "suspense story". In this sense, it approaches the visual culture of black cinema, or "physical cinema" as defined by Mirjam Schaub (Cardiff & Schaub, 2006) [11]. In other words, daily experience is mediated by our visual background of cinema culture, or the ability to interact with the urban space with a multiplicity of images-landscapes, where the viewer's movement and experience is placed outside the space of representation of galleries and museums. So, the performance's work is positioned in a physical place and immersed in a hybrid environment where the borders between real and fictitious are blurred.

One of the most paradigmatic works of Cardiff is *Her Long Black Hair* (2004), (figure 2), which is made in Central Park in New York. Visitors to Central Park are provided with a CD, a map and a set of photographs taken in specific places in the park and featuring an enigmatic girl with black hair. In this narrated tour, participants are instructed to stand in those photographed places and take the numbered photographs. The audio combines gospel music, reflecting interrelations between landscape, audio, and photographs with notions about possession, loss, history and beauty. The narrative is non-linear, environmental, contradictory and schizophrenic in some moments, creating an experience of immediate physicality with a surprising and disturbing complexity.



**Figure 2.** Janet Cardiff, *Her Long Black Hair* (2004). (Source: <http://www.cardiffmiller.com/>)

This strange confusion of realities follows cartographic, spatial and temporal models. The aim is to reconstruct a spatio-temporal narrative, which deconstructs and reconstructs a journey with historical significance. At this point, the relations and echoes of Deleuze and Guattari's (2005) [12] "theory of multiplicity" and "rhizome" with Cardiff's work are presented as unavoidable. The process of Cardiff's performances, in their cartographic, territorial and spatial mode and in their hybrid characteristics are related to the theories of "rhizome" explained by Deleuze and Guattari:

(...) the rhizome is made only of lines: lines of segmentarity and stratification as its dimensions, and the line of flight or deterritorialization as the maximum dimension after which the multiplicity undergoes metamorphosis, changes in nature. (...) the rhizome is an centered, nonhierarchical, nonsignifying system without a General and without an organizing memory or central automaton, defined solely by a circulation of states. (2005, p. 21) [12]

Cardiff configures the symbolic strata of public space, breaking the meaning of the original territories in indeterminate reverberations, and incorporates a possibility of multiple points of view in a coded space, as is Central Park. The recorded voice of Cardiff is the one that produces the “agency”, the enunciation of desire, love, loss and beauty in a disturbing plot that produces in the spectator a state of anxiety, and a kind of a spatio-temporal unrecognized place. Since that space –Central Park– although characterized by the common “democratic” use, dedicated to relaxation and leisure, it is still a territory symbolized by power in a capitalist society. As David Harvey would say: “(...) The intersecting command of money, time and space form a substantial nexus of social power that we cannot afford to ignore” (1992, p. 226) [13].

In these psycho-geographical tours, remembrance and narrative memories are told by Cardiff herself, who acts with her voice as a guide. The sound includes references to historical past, fragments of fiction or spatio-temporal imaginaries. The spatial-temporal meta-narrative in *Her Long Black Hair* (2004) delves into the meaning of collective memory, using complex and diverse associations. It includes quotes from Søren Kierkegaard about the insignificant, a poem by Charles Baudelaire, words of the American slave Harry Thomas where he recounts the abuse he suffered and his epic escape from slavery or the invocation of Orpheus’ last look at Eurydice. The artist co-participates with the viewer in a reconstruction of the emblematic place of Central Park and its historical memory, but also a reconstruction with the backdrop of sounds of the everyday life of a big city like New York. Cardiff’s own experience of place reflected in sound and images, in some way, emulates the “imagined memories” that according to Andreas Huyssen are: “(...) the mass-marketed memories we consume are ‘imagined memories’ to begin with, and thus more easily forgettable than lived memories” (2003, p. 17) [14].

Cardiff’s idea of activating memory as a reference, reminds us of the current obsession with commemoration, remembrance and historical celebration. In this regard, Andreas Huyssen argues that this obsession with memory is derived from a crisis in the belief of a rational structure of temporality. At the beginning of the 20th century this obsession was reflected in the works of Henri Bergson, Marcel Proust, Sigmund Freud and Walter Benjamin. In this way Huyssen expresses the current concern for memory: “To recover a mode of contemplation outside the universe of

simulation and fast-speed information and cable networks, to claim some anchoring space in a world of puzzling and often threatening heterogeneity, non-synchronicity and information overload (1995, p. 6) [15].

Andreas Huyssen has also observed that this insistence on models of memory recovery is due, in part, to the threat of amnesia and political manipulation of history. Against loss of memory, models have been created reshaping spatial and temporal meanings, especially of urban spaces. Cardiff uses this literary technique of palimpsests or “spatio-temporal anachronies” to exercise co-optation in the process of imagining memories of urban spaces through walks. This is what Andreas Huyssen call “spatial palimpsests”. As Huyssen argues, rewriting with the trope of palimpsest in the city enables and reinforces

(...) an urban imaginary in its temporal reach may well put different things in one place: memories of what there was before, imagined alternatives to what there is. The strong marks of present space merge in the imaginary with traces of the past, erasures, losses, and heterotopias. (2003, p. 7) [14]

## 4. Conclusions

The artists we have explored here start from the idea of space and time, to shape their installations and artistic interventions from the experimental and sensory atmospheres to the anachronisms and memories in their narrative uses. In these two artists we find a way to create artistic spaces based on perception, movement and body kinesthesia of the spectator. These works promote an activated viewer, who constructs with their senses and perceptions the existence and production of the artistic work.

The activation of the spectator in Janet Cardiff is literal and necessary, so that their space-time narrative displacements take place. In Olafur Eliasson the activation of the spectator is produced from the sensory and haptic flow in an atmospheric and spatialized world. Thus, creating new spaces from interruption and narrative multiplicities that it proposes to the viewer. The line of argument proposes the visitor as the true interlocutor who co-produces the work and activates new perceptive and sensitive experiences. The dialogue of the body with the environment produces atmospheres that subvert institutional contexts and socio-spatial conventions. We hold here that the works of Olafur Eliasson and Janet Cardiff produce a political activation of the environment. We argue about some of their works, placing them in direct relation with cultural theories that are framed in the new performativities of the space-time construct.

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